

On Othello and Desdemona

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Lie with her? lie on her?
Othello, IV.i.35¹

In his book, *The Claim of Reason*, which concludes with a well-known interpretation of *Othello*, the philosopher Stanley Cavell discusses what he calls “the truth of skepticism”². Following Wittgenstein (and, before him, David Hume) Cavell claims that the real issue in skepticism is not the limitations of our knowledge of the world out there – the confines of our senses, say, or the finitude of our consciousness. Descartes notwithstanding, we pretty much accept that there are sidewalk curbs on which we might trip, trains and planes we might catch or miss. As Hume drily put it, “the great subverter of [...] excessive scepticism is [...] the occupation of life”³. At the same time, Cavell claims (again following Hume and Wittgenstein), skepticism is not just a matter of *self*-knowledge – if by

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- ¹ All quotations are from William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, with a new introduction by Ayanna Thompson, London, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2016.
 - ² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, rpt. with a new preface 1999, p. 7 and passim.
 - ³ Hume rejected what he called “excessive scepticism” on the simple grounds that it makes life unlivable, practically. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning HuUnderstanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 158-59.

self-knowledge we mean some sort of boot-strapping, solipsistic circuitry in which I take myself to be both the subject and object of my thinking.

Instead, for Cavell, the primary issue raised by skepticism is an abiding uncertainty concerning *other people* – doubts about who they are, about how to deal with them, or how to live with the worry that we can probably never know them fully. Some philosophers call this the ‘problem of other minds’. (“Men should be what they seem, / Or those that be not, would they might seem none”, *Othello*, III.iii.129-30.) Because this problem can never be overcome by amassing knowledge or evidence about other people, getting to know another person is shot through with skepticism. By the same token, skepticism is especially pressing wherever exposure to one another is heightened – in intimate relationships, like love affairs⁴. Further, if we can never fully ‘know’ another person, then it does not take much for the skeptic to begin questioning whether others are truly as they seem to be. Is this other person *really* another person – independent, desiring, and self-aware like I think I am? How can I know that she is real, authentic? And, if so, how? These are issues, I will suggest, that explain Othello’s violence against Desdemona.

Cavell also suggests that this uncertainty about others cannot be separated from a deep anxiety about ourselves: Do *I* exist? Am *I* true, authentic and real – and how can I be sure? If my own self-certainty is bound up with my doubts about other people, then “the integrity of *my* existence [...] may depend on the fact and on the idea of another being’s existence, and on the possibility of proving that existence”⁵. Which means – to put it the other way around – finding another authentic, true human being amounts to discovering whether anyone really *knows or understands me*. (Am I just a walking shadow? “Does any here know me?” – to borrow King Lear’s succinct question – “Who is it that can tell me who I am?”). And this anxiety tumbles into other problems pursued by Cavell as well⁶. Shouldn’t *I* be in the best position to judge whether someone else really knows *me*? Shouldn’t I

⁴ See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 341 and passim.

⁵ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 422.

⁶ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 384-93.

know myself – what it is like being me – better than (or, at least, different than) anyone? After all, if I am *fully* knowable by someone else – if the gap between how others might know me and how I know myself were erased – then the difference between myself and others starts to break down: I lose myself. “You cannot [know my thoughts]”, as Iago puts it, “if my heart were in your hand, / Nor shall not whilst ‘tis in my custody” (III.iii.165-66). At any rate, Cavell’s intriguing suggestion is that the achievement of first-personal experience – the feeling of ‘leading one’s life’ – arises as objective efforts to know or understand others, from my concrete efforts to make others know or understand me (to “say what I mean”, in Cavell’s phrasing)⁷. All this is worth bearing in mind.

Now, in his reading of *Othello*, Cavell argues that Othello “avoids acknowledging” Desdemona’s independence, her desires and vitality, by murdering her⁸. While suffocating one’s lover in bed may seem an extreme manifestation of such failure, nevertheless its possibility belongs, according to Cavell, to “the way human sexuality is the field in which the fantasy of finitude, of its acceptance and its repetitious overcoming, is worked out; the way human separateness is turned equally toward splendor and toward horror”⁹. According to Cavell, Desdemona confronts Othello with something he cannot tolerate – the independence of her vitality, of her desire, awaiting him stretched upon the bed. (“O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!”, III.iii.272-74.) She presents

⁷ Cavell also presents this as the inseparability of what he calls “active” and “passive” skepticism – active skepticism being the way I deal with trying to know another; passive skepticism being the way I try to make myself known to another. See Richard Moran, “Cavell on Outsiders and Others”, *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 2 (September 2011), p. 256, and Robert Pippin, “Active and Passive Skepticism in Nicholas Ray’s *In a Lonely Place*”, nonsite.org, 5 (March 18, 2012).

⁸ “He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain’s captain”, Stanley Cavell, “Othello and the Stake of the Other”, in *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, ed. Paul A. Kottman, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 164. The avoidance of acknowledgment is the key to Cavell’s reading of Shakespearean tragedy, as in his essay on *King Lear*, called “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*”, in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, updated edition 2003, pp. 38-123.

⁹ Cavell, “Othello and the Stake of the Other”, p. 165.

Othello with his limits: both *her* desire and, perhaps worse, the urgings of *his own* desire¹⁰. In Cavell's words, Othello is "surprised by [Desdemona], at what he has elicited from her; at, so to speak, a success rather than a failure"¹¹. In some respects, Cavell's interpretation is helpful, not least because it counters a common misunderstanding of the play according to which Othello is a kind of puppet or "credulous fool" (IV.i.45) whose strings are pulled by Iago¹². To return to the terms of my discussion we could say that, if Desdemona *wants* to make love to him – to *him*, Othello (not just to him as 'male', or as 'general') – then Othello cannot make sense of his sexual interactions with Desdemona as *either* his sexual domination of her, or as their entanglement with the demands of natural appetite and procreation. Shakespeare's play begins, then, with the profound threat to sense that adheres in lovemaking: namely, *prior self-conceptions* in our historical sexual self-education – that human beings sexually reproduce, and that human beings 'act' by sexually dominating other human beings – start to lose their explanatory force when lovers cannot explain to themselves what they are experiencing in terms of either biology or coercive force¹³.

However, Cavell points not only to Othello's 'surprise' at eliciting Desdemona's desire. Cavell also sees Othello's 'surprise' as that which renders him murderous, as the reason Othello accepts the idea of Desdemona's infidelity and smothers her in their bed¹⁴. Here, I am left with questions about Cavell's interpretation. How can Othello apprehend – that is, how can he even identify, and thus be 'surprised'

¹⁰ Cf. Cavell, "Othello and the Stake of the Other", p. 165.

¹¹ Cavell, "Othello and the Stake of the Other", p. 164. This is what Cavell means when he asserts that "the idea of Desdemona as an adulterous whore is more convenient to [Othello] than the idea of her as chaste", or when he claims that Desdemona's faithfulness is worse than her faithlessness. Desdemona's adultery is convenient in that it gives Othello cover, a chance to doubt what he knows – that Desdemona desires him (pp. 161-62).

¹² After all, if Othello is nothing more than the gullible victim of a nefarious villain, then the entire story starts to look like just a sad misfortune. Cavell, "Othello and the Stake of the Other", p. 162.

¹³ This is given a fuller elaboration in Paul A. Kottman, *Love as Human Freedom*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2017.

¹⁴ Cavell, "Othello and the Stake of the Other", p. 164.

by – the independence of Desdemona’s desire as something that he elicits, unless he is already engaged sexually with Desdemona in a non-domineering, non-appetitous way? If Othello has no experience – however fleeting, however preliminary – of making love with Desdemona, or at least of imagining it, then how could Othello be ‘surprised’, in the way Cavell suggests, by a “success rather than a failure”?¹⁵

Moreover, why should the ‘surprise’ of lovemaking – the prospect of a genuine seduction – lead Othello to murderously “avoid acknowledging” that surprise, and to take refuge instead in the “convenient idea” that Desdemona is “an adulterous whore” by, ultimately, smothering her in their bed?¹⁶ Cavell’s answer to this is that Othello “is rendered impotent and murderous by aroused, or by having aroused, female sexuality – or let us say [...] horrified by human sexuality, in himself and in others”¹⁷. But then why should the experience of lovemaking – or the experience of imagining it – lead to impotence, or arouse murderousness? Whence this horror in the face of “human sexuality” in general, or in response to “female sexuality” in particular? Cavell seems to see this as a kind of ahistorical, psychic necessity: “human sexuality” or “female sexuality” can be horror-inducing, to the point of arousing murderousness, Cavell thinks, because “accepting one’s individuality or individuation” involves what he calls “the necessity of a double acceptance” – accepting “one’s mother as an independent sexual being” and accepting “one’s father as a dependent sexual being”¹⁸. If I understand Cavell here, to be “horrified” by “human” or “female sexuality” is part of the challenge of accepting one’s separateness from others, a work of mourning; in particular of acknowledging male dependence on

¹⁵ Cavell suggests, further, that Othello and Desdemona might not have made love, asking: “Well, were the sheets stained or not? Was she a virgin or not?”, Cavell, “Othello and the Stake of the Other”, p. 163.

¹⁶ Harry Berger Jr. follows Cavell’s reading, casting it in terms of sinning, in “Three’s Company: The Specter of Contaminated Intimacy in *Othello*”, *The Shakespearean International Yearbook* (2004), pp. 235-63.

¹⁷ Cavell, “Othello and the Stake of the Other”, p. 165.

¹⁸ See Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, pp. 188-89.

female sexual independence¹⁹.

I confess that it is easier for me to see sexual disgust (or the work of mourning) as an explanation for, say, Hamlet's behavior toward Gertrude than as an explanation for Othello's murder of Desdemona. In *Othello*, Shakespeare seems to have had a different dynamic in mind, another dramatic stake. Othello does not seem horrified by sex as such, the way that Hamlet seems to be when he speaks of Gertrude and Claudius "[i]n the rank sweat of an enseamed bed / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty" (III.iv.90-92)²⁰. If Othello is unsettled by Iago's image of Desdemona and Cassio "as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys" (III.iii.406), then this has less to do with Othello's 'acceptance' of Desdemona's independence than with his efforts at proving her independence.

And in the murder scene are we not invited, even tempted, by Shakespeare to imagine Othello doing something else with Desdemona in bed, besides smothering her? Moreover, what was Desdemona thinking, as she lay in bed under Othello, as he put his hands on her? Desdemona did not try to escape, or scream for help – as Gertrude cried out ("Help, ho!", III.iv.21) when Hamlet sat her down in her bedchamber. Does not Desdemona play a role in this, beyond the one Cavell assigns to her?

Let me, then, look again at Shakespeare's drama to see what else the play might help us to explain and understand.

First, consider that Othello's early courtship of Desdemona required Othello to question a deep-seated conception of himself as 'master'. As a high-ranking officer, Othello was of course accustomed to exerting mastery over his own bodily life as well the bodies of others; institutional domination and the satisfaction of his desires had gone hand in hand. Indeed, Othello thinks that Desdemona loves him

¹⁹ "Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona [...] is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own [...] as dependent, as partial", Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 138.

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, London, The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2006.

for this very reason: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them” (I.iii.168-69). Given this, it is striking that Othello does not simply look upon Desdemona the way he regards his soldiers – as a body to be commanded, as the instrument for the fulfillment of his orders, as his property or chattel.

Having won Desdemona with his tales and displays of mastery in the world, Othello discovers that he does not want to be *her* master. Not that Othello is physically or socially or economically incapable of coercing Desdemona. Sexual domination is just not what he desires with her. It matters to him – quite a lot, in fact – that Desdemona turn out to be an independent being, acting on her own desires. He finds that *his* desire for her is not indifferent to *her* desires, whatever they may be. He cares about what she wants, because he also wants to be known that *he* has seduced *her* – that each is acting freely. Indeed, by courting Desdemona, Othello has learned that institutionalized forms of sexual domination cannot provide the freedom (the love) he seeks. He has absorbed the lessons of courtship, discussed above. Othello would rather see Desdemona dead at his feet than bent before him on her knees. If this is not wrong, then at least a few things follow.

First, although it is true that Othello is concerned with Desdemona’s sexual fidelity or “honor”, to the extent that this touches on his own social standing, this is not his primary concern²¹. Contrary to a common misunderstanding about the play, it is not the objective *fact* of Desdemona’s behavior – her supposed sexual infidelity – that most disturbs Othello. Nor is cuckolding beyond bearing²². It is rather Othello’s first-person experience of her sexual adventures that upsets him. He makes this clear:

I swear 'tis better to be much abused
Than but to know't a little.

²¹ For one expression of this concern about public honor, see *Othello*, IV.i.190ff. Another comes at III.iii.389ff.

²² Othello notes this: “to make me / The fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow and moving finger at! / Yet could I bear that too, well, very well: / But there where I have garnered up my heart, / Where either I must live or bear no life / The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up – to be discarded thence!” (IV.ii.54-61).

[...]

What sense had *I* of her stol'n hours of lust?
I saw't not, thought it not, it harmed not *me*,
I slept the next night well, fed well, was free and merry;
I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips;
 He that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen,
 Let him not know't, and he's not robbed at all.

[...]

I had been happy if the general camp,
 Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
 So *I* had nothing known.

(III.iii.339-50, my emphases)

Or, as Iago says, "if it touch not you it comes near nobody" (IV.i.195-96). But why should such first-person knowledge unsettle Othello, if whatever is known (objectively, as it were) is not disturbing in itself – if it is disturbing only because it is known *by him*? What is the difference between facts being known, and *knowing* the facts?

Consider – as a way of providing an answer – the difference between Iago's and Othello's preoccupations. From Iago's perspective, jealousy – the "green-eyed monster" (III.iii.168) – expresses a lack of certainty about the way things stand 'out there' in the world, a nagging sense that one is ignorant about some objective reality that touches directly upon one's own standing before others. Put in terms of my discussion thus far, Iago thinks that jealousy targets clandestine lovers (the 'adulterous' lovers I discussed above, whose only 'reality' is their passionate lovemaking) – those whose affairs threaten or undermine institutionalized forms of sexual domination, and hence require stamping out.

Precisely because cuckolding or passionate, adulterous affairs have so little 'objective' standing in the world, for reasons I gave earlier, Iago can goad Othello with his sheer lack of concrete evidence. This is why Iago tempts Othello with (semi)concrete evidence of a passion that cannot be objectively 'proven' from the outside: lovemaking. And it is why Iago thinks that he can manipulate Othello with the promise of further testimony that "speaks against [Desdemona] with the other proofs" (III.iii.444):

That cuckold lives in bliss
 Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger,
 But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
 Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet fondly loves!
 (III.iii.169-172)

Or, again, as he later says to Othello:

O, 'tis the spite of hell, the fiend's arch-mock,
 To lip a wanton in a secure couch
 And to suppose her chaste. No, let me know,
 And, knowing what I am, I know what she shall be.
 (IV.i.70-73)

For Iago, then, it is clear that 'love' amounts to what I have been calling 'sexual domination'. Othello's sexual agency (for Iago) hinges on the objective 'proof' of, the institutional demand for, Desdemona's chastity and subjugation – just as Othello's standing as an officer demands his soldiers' loyalty, just as a daughter's obedience demonstrates a father's ability to command. 'Love', for Iago, names a bond or fidelity that must be publically demonstrated through sexual dominance – and, hence, that would be publically undone when such fidelity cannot be demonstrated²³. Love and jealousy are mutually exclusive; for Iago, it would be a straightforward contradiction to love jealously²⁴.

And yet – to repeat – the 'objective facts' of Desdemona's interactions with Cassio are not what ultimately unsettle Othello. It is Othello's subjective viewpoint – the unavoidability of his first-person stance (*knowing* the facts) – that upsets him. If this is right, then Othello does not interrogate Iago because he craves the sort of evidence that might convince a jury, or to establish Desdemona's

²³ Iago draws attention to these different kinds of 'bonds' through his repeated use of the words 'bound' or 'bond'. See David Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare, Love and Service*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 275.

²⁴ Following through on this logic, of course, would require Othello to enforce strict control over Desdemona's movements, her sexual agency, and ultimately over her life.

sexual fidelity to him. Just as no one could ever convince Othello of Desdemona's innocence, so too no one else could convince him of her guilt. Which is to say, no one can demonstrate to him Desdemona's love – any more than he can objectively prove to others his love of her. This should be obvious; otherwise, all we are witnessing is the depressing soap opera of a jealous husband who enlists a devious detective to do the work of deciding for him whether his love is merited, whether his wife has been subjugated to him.

But if – for Othello – 'love' does not mean sexual domination, or a publically verifiable bond rooted in objective evidence, then what does he mean when he says he 'loves' Desdemona? What does he mean when he says things like "My life upon her faith" (I.iii.295), if he does not mean that he prizes her obedience of fidelity above all?

Well, he clarifies somewhat when he says things like "perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (III.iii.90-92). By "chaos", Othello seems to mean a profound threat to any sense he might make of his life and its conditions. Hence, it is not his honor, but the intelligibility of anything at all that he sets upon Desdemona's faith and his love for her. "If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself" (III.iii.282). The question, then, is how did the intelligibility of Othello's life and worldly conditions come – for him – to depend upon the fate of his courtship of Desdemona?

We have already identified one reason. Because mastery and sexual domination are not what Othello wants with Desdemona, it is not her disobedience – but rather the cessation of his love – that would render his actions unintelligible, that would make "chaos come again". Othello intuits that his freedom *is* his love of Desdemona. Without mutual recognition, without genuine seduction between two independent beings, what is there? If before Desdemona came into his life, Othello could reassure himself that the life he was leading was 'his' by means of conquering and subduing – military life, sexual domination – here such reassurance is not possible. He cannot love Desdemona by conquering her because, to repeat, he is not indifferent to what she wants. If his desire is thus entangled with hers, then his self-conception as a 'free' being depends upon demonstrating *her* independence. In order to be sure that he is living

his life, realizing his desires, Othello now needs to be certain that Desdemona is doing the same. This is his predicament, the meaning of his jealousy.

Othello aims to demonstrate the independence and vitality of Desdemona's desire – not, as Cavell has it, to “avoid” or “deny” that independent vitality. But why should this demonstration turn out to be murderous?

I am not suggesting that Othello is fully aware of everything I am saying here. I understand Othello to be finding out what he wants as he goes along – especially, through the slow discovery of the difference between Iago's offered evidence and the ‘proof’ he really seeks. This is the stuff of their well-known exchanges, during which Iago and Othello talk past each other. Iago, for example, admonishes Othello to “beware [...] of jealousy” (III.iii.167) – meaning, again, that Othello should seek public proof of his sexual domination of Desdemona.

Othello, however, hears Iago to be suggesting that he, Othello, should take care to be sure of what *he himself* is doing. Othello hears a warning not to doubt *himself*. Here is the exchange:

IAGO

That cuckold lives in bliss
 Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger,
 But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
 Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet fondly loves!
 [...]
 Good God, the souls of all my tribe defend
 From jealousy.

OTHELLO

Why – why is this?
 Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy
 To follow still the changes of the moon
 With fresh suspicions? No, to be once in doubt
 Is once to be resolved.
 [...]
 No, Iago,
 I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove,

And on the proof there is no more but this:
 Away at once with love or jealousy!
 (III.iii.169-95)

I hear Othello to be saying that the sense he makes of the world will come from what *he himself* demonstrates to his own satisfaction, from what *he* accepts as proof or knowledge. While Othello will listen to Iago's counsel, he will think and decide for himself on the worth of that counsel; Iago may give him evidence, but it is evidence whose meaning Othello will adjudicate. Jealousy, for Othello, means the search for proof that *he* accepts.

For the time being, however, Othello fails to see that there is no objective evidence or proof that can furnish for him this first-person certainty. Getting proof – and *accepting* that proof – is going to be a lot more wrenching than merely looking upon this or that bit of evidence and making a detached judgment. Nevertheless, for the moment, Othello continues to hope that Iago might at least furnish him with the evidence to be judged. And this, of course, tumbles directly into the farcical exchange in which Iago is all too happy to participate. “Villain!” cries Othello, taking Iago by the throat, “be sure thou prove my love a whore, / Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof [...] Make me to see’t” (III.iii.362-67). “You would be satisfied?” (III.iii.396) taunts Iago. “Would? Nay, and I will” (III.iii.396), bellows Othello, setting the ball on the tee for Iago:

And may – but how? how satisfied, my lord?
 Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
 Behold her topped?
 [...]
 It were a tedious difficulty, I think,
 To bring them to that prospect. Damn them then
 If ever mortal eyes do see them bolster
 More than their own. What then? how then?
 What shall I say? where's satisfaction?
 It is impossible you should see this
 Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
 As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross
 As ignorance made drunk.

(III.iii.397-408)

The image of this farce – of all bedroom farces, probably – is the perfect depiction of Othello's impasse. For even if he were to "behold her topped", he would still not have the proof he seeks – an objective demonstration of Desdemona's independence (and hence of his own). Moreover, the extant institutions of patriarchal, sexual domination would leave Othello with an empty choice: either deny the reality before his eyes by proclaiming the lovers innocent (as King Mark did, when he found Tristan and Iseult in the woods); or, deny the reality through violent punishment (as with the Sultan's murderous rage in the *Thousand and One Nights*). Either option would leave Othello's love of Desdemona, his desire to have *her* independence demonstrated, unrealized.

Why, then, does Shakespeare ask us to imagine the farce? Not to furnish, once and for all, concrete evidence of who is having sex with whom²⁵. The image of the farce, rather, places the cuckold on the spot; it requires him to perform a self-expressive deed, to make clear through his action or response how he sees himself and others, to express his understanding of the situation in which he finds himself.

So, Othello finds himself pressed.

The question is no longer what Desdemona and Cassio objectively did, but what Othello himself will do with them. Which means that Othello's search for external evidence itself – for a wholly third-personal, institutional perspective that might remove the need for first-person experience and second-person intimacy – must grind to a halt. This, I think, explains why the circumstantial evidence of the handkerchief, and not concrete proof, finally concludes Othello's interrogations of Iago. Because the insinuations around the handkerchief require Othello himself to take action, to take up the matter with Desdemona, he has no further need of Iago. Which is also

²⁵ No one in the play – with the possible exception of Emilia – is really interested in objectively establishing Desdemona's guilt or innocence, her honor or her shame. And it is not entirely clear that Emilia's interest in this is altruistic. To a large extent, her own public standing is bound up with that of Desdemona.

to say, Othello never needed Iago for the reasons Iago believed – to decide on Desdemona’s guilt or innocence. The proof Othello seeks – the independence and vitality of Desdemona’s desire, that she is not merely an extension of *his* desire – is something that he cannot furnish unless he engages her. He must somehow confront Desdemona. But how?

I understand Othello’s shift into the first-person hot seat to be signaled, in Shakespeare, by the trance or ‘fit’ into which he falls at precisely this moment. (“Lie with her? lie on her?”, IV.i.35.) According to Cavell, Othello’s trance expresses not “conviction in a piece of knowledge” but “an effort to stave the knowledge off”²⁶. But again, I do not think that the only issue here is Othello’s difficulty in accepting Desdemona’s literal innocence – his failure to ‘acknowledge’ Desdemona’s adoration of him.

At issue is the moral imagination required of Othello, subjectively, if he is to acknowledge Desdemona as an independent being. In order to perceive (or imagine) Cassio and Desdemona in an intimate embrace, Othello must also perceive (or imagine) such intimacy *for himself*. Iago cannot do *that* for him – no matter how carefully he sets or describes the scene. Even as spectator – indeed, precisely as ideal spectator – Othello simply cannot remove himself from the picture. He cannot let Iago’s perspective replace his own. His fantasies must take over (or not), as is suggested by the preceding exchange:

²⁶ In other words, Othello “*knows* (Iago’s insinuations) to be false” – so, for Cavell, the trance is something like Othello’s “massive denial” of what he knows. The full passage reads: “the words of a man in a trance, in a dream state, fighting not to awaken; willing for anything but light. By ‘denial’ I do not initially mean something requiring psychoanalytical, or any other theory. I mean merely to ask that we not, conventionally but insufferably, assume that we know this woman better than this man knows her – making Othello some kind of erotic, gorgeous, superstitious lunkhead; which is about what Iago thinks. However much Othello deserves each of these titles, however far he believes Iago’s tidings, he cannot just believe them; somewhere he also *knows* them to be false”, Cavell, “Othello and the Stake of the Other”, pp. 157, 161.

OTHELLO

What hath [Cassio] said?

IAGO

Faith, that he did – I know not what he did –

OTHELLO

What? what?

IAGO

Lie.

OTHELLO

With her?

IAGO

With her, on her, *what you will*.

(IV.i.31-34, my emphasis)

At which point, Othello's own sense making is engaged. Is Othello envisioning himself with Desdemona when he says the following?

OTHELLO

Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her'when they belie her! Lie with her, zounds, that's fulsome! – Handkerchief! confessions! handkerchief! – To confess, and be hanged for his labour! First to be hanged, and then to confess: I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? Confess! handkerchief! O devil! (IV.i.35-43)

Where might such fantasies lead? What would it be to live out the sense Othello is making of things?

In the next scene, then, Othello externalizes his fantasies. He strikes Desdemona, using the same word "devil" repeatedly – as if literally acting out the 'subjective' fantasies expressed in his trance²⁷. Because we often forget this moment of naked aggression – which

²⁷ Othello refers to Desdemona as "devil" at several points. See, for example, III.iii.481. The term is also applied to others in the play – indeed, it is frequently repeated. But Othello uses the term only in reference to Desdemona. Even after Iago's deception has come to light, Othello calls him only "demi-devil" (V.ii.298).

presages, and might help explain, the final tableau – let me recall the exchange, which confuses Othello’s violence against Desdemona with his reaction to the message contained in a letter delivered by Lodovico:

DESDEMONA

Cousin, there’s fallen between him and my lord
An unkind breach, but you shall make all well –

OTHELLO

Are you sure of that?

DESDEMONA

My lord?

OTHELLO

[Reads.] This fail you not to do, as you will –

LODOVICO

He did not call, he’s busy in the paper.
Is there division ‘twixt my lord and Cassio?

DESDEMONA

A most unhappy one: I would do much
T’atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio.

OTHELLO

Fire and brimstone!

DESDEMONA

My lord?

OTHELLO

Are you wise?

DESDEMONA

What, is he angry?

LODOVICO

May be the letter moved him;
For, as I think, they do command him home,

Deputing Cassio in his government.

DESDEMONA

By my thorth, I am glad on't.

OTHELLO

Indeed!

DESDEMONA

My lord?

OTHELLO

I am glad... to see you mad.

DESDEMONA

Why, sweet Othello?

OTHELLO

Devil! [*Striking her*]

(IV.i.224-39)

As I see it, Othello's actions might be made intelligible along the lines I suggested earlier – as Othello's attempt to 'know' whether Desdemona acts independently²⁸. Othello, I am suggesting, wants to know that he has seduced, not mastered, Desdemona; that this is a love affair, not military life. Striking and debasing one's lover in front of others might seem a counter-intuitive – if not counter-productive – way to demonstrate her independence. But perhaps it looks less mysterious if we remember that lovers' quarrels are often nothing more than bald-faced provocations – attempts to 'get a rise' out of the other, to bring one another back to life, to achieve a confrontation

²⁸ To Lodovico and Desdemona, and to the others present, Othello's actions and motives are unclear. Othello makes no explicit accusation – nor does he attempt to justify his actions. "Is it his use? [to strike Desdemona] / Or did the letters work upon his blood / And new-create his fault?" (IV.i.274-76). Hence, Lodovico's bewilderment – "My lord, this would not be believed in Venice / Though I should swear I saw't. 'Tis very much; / Make her amends, she weeps" (IV.i.241-43). And after Othello departs, Lodovico inquires, "Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain? [...] What, strike his wife?" (IV.i.269-72).

between two independent living, desiring people²⁹. Of course, if the provocation continues to be merely abusive, then there remains only straightforward opposition, contempt, or the domination of one by the other. On the other hand, the conflict could lead to reconciliation *with* the other's independence – which might be why such provocations and squabbles can lead so immediately to kissing and making up. As everyone knows, lovemaking can result from – even accomplish, or finish – a quarrel³⁰.

At any rate, by slapping and berating Desdemona, I understand Othello to be testing her independence – to be looking for 'objective' proof of her independence that he can accept. She responds evasively – "I have not deserved this" (IV.i.240), she says tearfully. Othello tries again, this time mocking her tears as false:

O, devil, devil!

If that the earth could teem with woman's tears
Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile:
Out of my sight!
(IV.i.243-46)

Desdemona demurs, slinking away: "I will not stay to offend you", she says (IV.i.246). "Truly, an obedient lady", says Lodovico (IV.i.247) – unaware that it is precisely such servility that Othello wishes to disprove. Hence, Othello tests her again, demanding that Desdemona return – "Mistress!", "My lord?" she repeats for the fourth time in the exchange, obedient as ever. "What would you with her, sir?" says Othello to Lodovico (IV.i.249-51) – underscoring that Desdemona's obedience makes her attachment to him, Othello, interchangeable with her attachment to any master or man:

[...] you did wish that I would make her turn.

²⁹ Where physical violence is not effective or possible or desirable, one might nag or harangue. To be clear, I am not defending such actions myself (I hope this is understood); I am trying to explain Othello's actions in view of the historical possibilities open to him.

³⁰ Provided, however, that the quarrel is not a genuine duel or battle to the death, wherein destructive intent or a will to mastery is recognized on both sides.

Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on
 And turn again. And she can weep, sir, weep.
 And she's obedient: as you say, obedient.
 Very obedient. (IV.i.252-56)

Desdemona shows herself to be obedient, dominated sexually and otherwise³¹. Where the others see in this a virtue, Othello sees vacuity.

Anything but your obedience! Your obedience makes me interchangeable, one of many possible masters in a game of sexual domination. Unless you demonstrate that your actions are not extensions of my authority, of sexual domination, then we are not lovers. This is the thrust of Othello's pursuit, when he next confronts Desdemona. In the face of her confusion – "I understand a fury in your words, / But not the words" (IV.ii.32-33) – he demands to know: "Why, *what art thou?*" (IV.ii.34, my emphasis); "Your wife, my lord; your true and loyal wife" (IV.ii.35), comes the (to Othello) maddeningly routine response. Othello tries again:

OTHELLO

Come, swear it, damn thyself,
 Lest, being like one of heaven, the devils themselves
 Should fear to seize thee: therefore be double-damned,
 Swear thou are honest!

DESDEMONA

Heaven doth truly know it.

OTHELLO

Heaven truly knows that thou are false as hell.
 (IV.ii.36-40)

³¹ As the Norton editors point out, the line "she can turn and turn" refers to sex. Michael Neill notes, in the Oxford edition, that "the seventeenth-century pronunciation of *obedient* would allow an actor to disclose the mocking word *bed* concealed in its second syllable". See also his remarks in the Introduction to that edition, pp. 172-73.

How he jabs at her! – declaring her as honest “as summer flies are in the shambles, / That quicken even with the blowing” (IV.ii.67-68)³². Just as Hamlet accuses Ophelia of making “wantonness [her] ignorance” (III.i.145), so Othello musters his considerable eloquence in order to call Desdemona a whore³³:

Was this fair paper, this most goodly boo,
 Made to write ‘whore’ upon? What committed!
 Committed? O thou public commoner!
 I should make the very forges of my cheeks That
 would to cinders burn up modesty
 Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!
 Heaven stops the nose at it, and the moon
 winks, The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets
 Is hushed within the hollow mine of earth
 And will not hear’t. What committed!
 [...]
 Are you not a strumpet?
 [...]

³² If – as Cavell has it – Othello is ‘denying’ Desdemona’s innocence by calling her ‘whore’ or ‘strumpet’, then we have to wonder: why should Othello bother to involve Desdemona in this denial, by baldly provoking her repeatedly? If Othello is denying what he knows about Desdemona, then why seek to engage her at all, let alone in this direct and intimate manner? Why not just go straight to erasing her?

³³ When Othello mocks Desdemona for weeping – “O well-painted passion!” (IV.i.257) – we should, I think, hear echoes of Hamlet’s provocation of Ophelia: “I have heard of your paintings well enough” (*Hamlet*, III.i.141). Like Desdemona, Ophelia had been confused by Hamlet’s outburst – “O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!” (*Hamlet*, III.i.149). By accusing Ophelia of falsity – “God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another” (III.i.142-43) – was not Hamlet challenging Ophelia to demonstrate that she was an *authentic*, independent, creature, not merely the obedient extension of Hamlet’s own (or of Polonius’ or some other man’s) desire? Hamlet seems to have frightened Ophelia with his earlier use of force against her – which I am tempted to understand as another attempt to ‘get a rise’ out of her, to demonstrate *her* self-certainty. (“He took me by the wrist and held me hard, / Then goes he to the length of all his arm / And with his other hand thus o’er his brow / He falls to such perusal of my face / As ‘a would draw it. Long stayed he so; / At last, a little shaking of mine arm / And thrice his head thus waving up and down, / He raised a sigh so piteous and profound / That it did seem to shatter all his bulk / And end his being”, *Hamlet* II.i.84-93). It used to be believed that *Othello* was written just after *Hamlet*, as “confirmed by similarities of style, diction and versification”, A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, New York, Penguin, 1990, p. 175.

What, not a whore?
(IV.ii.72-88)

Why does Othello prod Desdemona thus? “A beggar in his drink / Could not have laid such terms upon his callat”, says Emilia (IV.ii.122-23).

I agree with Cavell when he says that Othello ‘knows’ Desdemona to be innocent of Iago’s slander. But I do not hear Othello trying to ‘avoid’ this knowledge. Rather, I hear him *testing* or challenging Desdemona’s innocence, trying to make sense of it as something other than obedience and fidelity to command³⁴. How better (he thinks) to upend the institution of sexual domination than to call one’s innocent, obedient wife a whore, strumpet? How better to find out if she is anything more than obedient? How better, that is, to see if and how *she* reacts?

“Are not you a strumpet?” (IV.ii.83), insists Othello.

DESDEMONA
No, as I am a Christian.
If to preserve this vessel for my lord
From any hated foul unlawful touch
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.
(IV.ii.84-87)

“What, not a whore?”, Othello tries one last time. “No, as I shall be saved” (IV.ii.88), affirms Desdemona piously. “Is’t possible?” (IV.ii.89), Othello throws up his hands in frustration, leaving with her one last zinger – “I cry you mercy then, / I took you for that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello” (IV.ii.90-92). Am I alone in sensing Othello’s disappointment at not having had his volley returned?

If Othello fails to incite her with words and blows – if he perceives only obedience (“My lord”) – then *how* to know the independence of

³⁴ I also hear this in Hamlet’s berating of Ophelia. “You jig and amble and you lisp, you nickname God’s creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance” (*Hamlet*, III.i.143-45).

Desdemona's desire? How to demonstrate that he has seduced and not mastered her? This is why her obedience is unnerving – her acquiescence effaces her, it makes her (and him) interchangeable parts of a social hierarchy. If she merely obeys, then he has mastered, not seduced her.

And that is not all. Othello also finds Desdemona irresistibly attractive, intoxicating. But her beauty and his arousal only leave him asking: *By whom or what am I seduced?* If it is just her feminine beauty and sensuous charm, then *she* – Desdemona – has no independent existence: there is only 'woman', witchcraft, voluptuousness, impersonal appetites. Seduction starts to look like compulsion or impulse, not freedom. The threats to sense mount. But how to prove that she is not a witch? How to know that he desires her – Desdemona, the real live person, someone who might accept or refuse him? There is, Othello concludes, only one way to find out:

Get you to bed

On th' instant, I will be returned forthwith.

Dismiss your attendant there: look't be done.

(IV.iii.5-7)

With this, let me return to the questions with which my discussion of *Othello* began. Can a seduction be known? Can we *know* that we are lovers? Can the achievement of such knowledge be something other than its sexual consummation, a subjectively felt passion?

Othello enters their bedroom and gazes upon Desdemona, "that whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster" (V.ii.4-5), inhaling her "balmy breath" (V.ii.16)³⁵. Othello is surely self-aware enough to know that there is no use denying his sexual desire for Desdemona, that even

³⁵ Whereas Cavell sees the invocation of "monumental alabaster" – and, indeed, the murder – as the "turning of Desdemona to stone", it seems to me that matters unfold in just the opposite direction. Othello wants to rouse her with his kisses – he wants reassurance that she is not only pleasing to the senses, or a breathing monument, but that she also acts independently. See Cavell, "Othello and the Stake of the Other", p. 162. Cavell also begins his reflections on *Othello* by invoking the end of *The Winter's Tale* – the fact that Leontes had accepted Hermione's having become a statue as "the right fate for her disappearance from life" (p. 154).

killing Desdemona will not free him from wanting her³⁶. He even says so – “Be thus when thou art dead and I will kill thee / And love thee after” (V.ii.18-19). So, I cannot believe that Othello does not want to get into bed; I also cannot believe that he does not know that this is what he wants. Yet he fights the urge³⁷.

In part, this is because he seeks to prove to himself that he is not driven by desire alone – that he is not merely attracted by a sensuous body that feeds and stokes his appetite. However, if Othello *only* wanted to prove that he is not driven by blind desire, then it would have been enough to reject her advances – “Will you come to bed, my lord?” (V.ii.24) – or to leave the room, or to practice some other form of chaste restraint. So, what else is he trying to prove?

Othello, I think, wants *objective* proof that lovemaking is being achieved, that there is genuine ‘subjective’ seduction between two independent people. Indeed, he will refrain from making love with her until the independence of her desire is demonstrated. But this leaves Othello with the impossible task of parsing his own arousal while gauging the risks of intimacy with Desdemona. On the one hand, because he seeks an objective demonstration that *he* can accept, he must remain on the bed next to her – tarrying with his own arousal, searching her eyes for evidence. On the other hand, because he will not accept lovemaking itself (that subjective act) as objective

³⁶ And if Othello knows *this*, then he must also realize that there is nothing that he can do on his own to ‘prove’ that his desire is not impulse or sensuous appetite. This is why simply robbing Desdemona of breath unilaterally, while she sleeps, will not suffice. To prove anything, he must rouse her.

³⁷ As mentioned, it can be tempting to see sex as one of those activities – like sleeping – to which we sometimes succumb, during which urges and impulses supplant full consciousness. But if sex entails a suspension of self-awareness, then in what sense am *I* the one having sex? Even if I ‘succumb’ to my desires, don’t I need be able to say to myself, at a minimum, that *I* succumbed? If I cannot even affirm *that*, then of what can I be certain? Likewise, while I may fall asleep without fully intending to do so, I still have to be able to recognize that *I* slept or that I had such-and-such a dream. Otherwise, to twist a trope from Descartes, I cannot take myself to be awake, to be living my life. If Othello is acting out his fantasies about Desdemona here, then this is not in order to make his dreams come true, but rather as a bid to gain assurance that he is indeed awake, living his life. To live out a fantasy is to seek assurance that one was not simply fantasizing.

proof, he must not let himself get *into* bed with her.

Let me shine a light on this moment to make an important claim before going on.

I want to say that the untenability of Othello's position – the internal contradiction I just described – *is* the historical impasse under consideration at this point in my broader account of love and freedom. The subjective act of lovemaking – the mutual recognition of two independent people, achieved by lovers like Tristan and Iseult – has not yet made itself socially real, for reasons already explained. And, I now want to say, lovemaking *cannot* make itself real unless it becomes 'objective' – demonstrable, proven – in the way that Othello wants. Othello is not wrong to need a worldly demonstration of Desdemona's love, of his love – not of obedience, but of *love*. For, without objective proof that they are lovers, what do they have? Domination and subjugation, perhaps, or blind appetites – or, at best, fantastical lovemaking and exchanges of tokens (handkerchiefs, rings) that remain, like medieval romance, fantasies by the lights of Venice's reality. Othello cannot be satisfied with such unreality.

For Othello sees himself as central to Venetian life, just as Venice is essential to him. He wants his marriage to be real in the world – which is to say that he needs lovemaking to be the *core* of his *whole* existence, the source of its meaning and value: both his subjective passions and his objective commitments to a way of life. This is not an idle need, or pleasant daydream. Othello cannot make sense of anything he is doing with Desdemona unless he gets this objectivity. And, if he cannot make sense of what he is doing with her, then of what *can* he make sense of? (Merely that he has objectively “done the state some service, and they know't” (V.ii.337) – which is where he, suicidally, ends up). Leading a desirable, intelligible life as something other than a cog in a social machine or natural process *requires* making lovemaking to be achieved as real, both to the lovers and objectively in the world.

Othello, thus, cannot make love to Desdemona unless their lovemaking gives him, not just assurance of their mutual recognition, but proof that this mutual recognition is the value on which their lives, their entire world, can be demonstrably based. But Desdemona

cannot give him that proof. How could she? Publically and objectively, and hence privately and subjectively, she can only offer to Othello that which Venice recognizes in her: obedience, sensuousness, willingness, desirability, impossible beauty. She can make love to Othello, even offer him her life, but she cannot – by making love to him, or by dying – give Othello a world in which lovemaking could have objective standing, demonstrable normative authority.

What, then, is required for the achievement of such a world? What does a *demonstration* that we are, really, lovers – truly free, independent desiring agents – require? We are, I think, today still working out the answer to that question, in our social practices and revised collective values. But I have already mentioned some of what is required. Recall the list of social commitments recited above: a sharp decrease in arranged or enforced marriages; sexual ‘liberation’, and the increasing acceptance of public, individual displays of affection; moral and legal codes according to which individuals can *refuse* the sexual advances of others; expanded possibilities for divorce and separation which render ‘marriage’ unions freer; the right of women to own property; economic equality; increased access to birth control and abortion by individuals; a total re-conception of what it means to have children; the disappearance of a gender-based division of labor³⁸.

Is it too much to consider each of these world-historical shifts, and others beside – all of whose implications and significance cannot be overestimated – as *rendered necessary* by the need to make lovemaking objective, real?

I do not think so, because each of these social changes answers directly to the challenges, the threats to sense, faced by *Desdemona* and *Othello*. *Othello* and *Desdemona* cannot make their lives and actions intelligible – to themselves, to one another, to the world – unless they manage to be lovers, subjectively-passionately and objectively in their shared way of life.

³⁸ For my own understanding of the significance of these changes, and how best to explain them, see my *Love as Human Freedom*, cit.

So, we watch Othello on the edge of the bed – struggling to get the objective proof he seeks without making love. Because he must avoid accepting subjective passion for objective proof, he must resist Desdemona's entreaties: "I hope you will not kill me" (V.ii.35)³⁹; "O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!" (V.ii.77).

DESDEMONA

Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight!

OTHELLO

Nay, if you strive –

DESDEMONA

But half an hour!

OTHELLO

Being done, there is no pause –

DESDEMONA

But while I say one prayer!

(V.ii.79-82)

But in a world in which lovemaking has not yet achieved objective standing or normative authority, what could Othello hope to prove?

At most, Othello can have objective evidence that Desdemona wants him more than she wants to stay alive, that she wants him no matter what. He can sever her desire for him from both her impersonal appetite and her social obedience. To prove that she loves him, she can let him put his hands around her neck. It is a logic with which seducers are not unfamiliar: physical surrender is necessary in order to demonstrate independence and the freedom of love.

Here the seducer's logic reaches its apotheosis. Desdemona's dead body is the only objective proof of freedom, of their love, that Othello

³⁹ I hear this to mean, 'I hope *you* will not kill me'. If this is to be read as 'I hope you will not *kill* me', then I cannot understand why Desdemona does not call for help. If it is to be read as 'I hope you will not kill *me*', then we have to conclude that Desdemona does not understand the danger she is in – which, of course, she clearly does (as at V.ii.37ff).

will have. No shedding of blood, no ruining of the flesh. So as to kill her and love her after.

To accept a world in which lovemaking has no normative authority, no demonstrable standing in our practices – at the heart of our way of life – is to accept a world in which *Desdemona* can live only as the embodiment of procreative demands and sensuous appetites, or as a subjugated, obedient woman. Either that, or it is to accept the necessity of her death.

Shakespeare, I take it, is tallying the precise cost of a world in which lovemaking remains a subjective, passionate possibility, but not yet a social reality. The cost is a world in which killing one's lover, being killed by one's lover, is perhaps the only way to prove that one loves truly. Love is 'externalized' in this world through the lover's dead body. To fully weigh the cost, moreover, Shakespeare also needs to show *Desdemona's* experience of what happens to her. That is, Shakespeare needs to show us what *Othello* – and we – are *missing* if we accept the necessity of *Desdemona's* destruction, or if we accept her reduction to procreative being or subjugated woman. Put another way, Shakespeare must show us that *Desdemona* might have lived freely *not* just in virtue of being recognized or treasured by 'us' (or by *Othello*, or the men in her life) – but because she herself is capable of realizing a free life, of being *Othello's* lover, of *earning* her freedom.

What freedom does *Desdemona* earn "in the feminine condition", to borrow Beauvoir's formulation?⁴⁰

So far as we perceive, *Desdemona* speaks only when addressing another. Shakespeare hears her only in dialogue. Not unlike *Juliet*, *Desdemona* was "bound" by duty to her father, "for life and education" (I.iii.182). What life she had, she owed to *Brabantio* and her family – in whose patriarchal bosom the independence of her desires had remained invisible. What was unthinkable to *Brabantio*

⁴⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York, Knopf, 2009.

was not a union between Othello and his daughter, but that his “quiet” daughter should be the one to want it⁴¹. Not, of course, because Othello was thought to be disagreeable, but because Desdemona was seen as obedient, sexually dominated by patriarchy. If Othello ‘won’ Desdemona – thinks Brabantio – then it must have been “with some mixtures powerful o’er the blood / Or with some dram conjured to this effect / He wrought upon her” (I.iii.105-7)⁴².

Of course, just as Juliet encountered Romeo at the Capulet masque, so too Desdemona came to know Othello within the family’s routines without needing to relate to Othello as family. This offered Desdemona the chance to claim the independence of her desire before her father, without having to oppose him (I.iii.180ff). If circumstances required drastic actions from Juliet, all that Desdemona needed do in order to leave her family – as far as Brabantio and cosmopolitan Venice were concerned – was to indicate that she knew what she wanted:

That I did love the Moor to live with him
My downright violence and scorn of fortunes
May trumpet to the world.
(I.iii.249-51)

Once her desire came into view before all of Venice, Desdemona could no longer stay in her father’s home (I.iii.242ff). Not because Desdemona’s desires were seen as illegitimate, but because the cloister of patriarchy could no longer offer a context in which these desires might flourish. Brabantio was not expressing bitterness at having been ‘deceived’ by Desdemona when he told Othello “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (I.iii.293-94). He was merely advising Othello to attend to Desdemona’s independence. As I have been claiming, Othello tried to

⁴¹ “A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself” (I.iii.95-97).

⁴² Cavell seems to echo Brabantio’s view of Desdemona’s obedience when he writes, of the final tableau, that Desdemona “obediently shares [Othello’s] sense that this is their final night”, Cavell, “Othello and the Stake of the Other”, p. 162.

do precisely this.

Some suspect that Desdemona wanted to die all along, that she sought death at Othello's hands⁴³. More often, she is seen as "helplessly passive" or a psychological "type"⁴⁴. Yet Desdemona is an individual, hence in a concrete historical predicament; and as she prepares to go to bed with Othello, she articulates her sexual desires against Emilia's disapproval. Othello has abused her publically. He has called her a "whore" and has thrown money at her (IV.ii.91). And now he is demanding that she await him, alone.

I do not know what Othello meant to say by calling me 'whore', by tossing coins at me. "Am I that name [...]? I am sure I am none such" (IV.ii.120, 125). Desdemona does not understand Othello's accusations; but she tries to understand his meaning. On the one hand, she cannot simply accept Othello's accusations, since she does not take herself to be a "whore"⁴⁵. His words and actions sting her because they are at odds with her self-conception; she cannot just *be* (or become) what he calls her. On the other hand, what Othello calls her, how he treats her – well, these things matter deeply to her. She is

⁴³ In 1980, the French philosopher Louis Althusser strangled his wife of 30 years, apparently while massaging her neck. (He was then declared mentally ill and institutionalized.) He later wrote about the events – wondering if his wife had wanted to die, if she had "passively accept[ed] death at [his] hands"; if it had been a case of "suicide via intermediary". See Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever*, trans. Richard Veasey, New York, The New Press, 1993, p. 281. For a reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* that entertains a similar supposition, see Elizabeth Gruber, "Erotic Politics Reconsidered: Desdemona's Challenge to Othello", *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 3:2 (Spring/Summer 2008), <https://www.borrowers.uga.edu/781790/pdf>. A less circumspect proposal of the same thesis is advanced in Robert Dickes, "Desdemona: An Innocent Victim?", *American Imago*, 27 (1970), pp. 279-97.

⁴⁴ A rare occasion on which A. C. Bradley seems to me to be wildly off-the-mark: "Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling [...] [her] suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being [s]he adores". Both in the secondary literature and in the performance history, Desdemona is regularly presented as a passive victim. See William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Michael Neill, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 103 and *passim*.

⁴⁵ "I cannot say whore: / It does abhor me now I speak the word; / To do the act that might the addition earn / Not the world's mass of vanity could make me" (IV.ii.163-66).

not immune to his gaze or accusations. She is not at all sure, then – either of herself, or of Othello⁴⁶.

In her exchange with Emilia, Desdemona weighs her own desires – and tries to arrive at *her* view of the meaning of sexual engagement with Othello. When she asks Emilia whether she – or “any such woman” (IV.iii.82) – would “do such a deed for all the world” (IV.iii.63, 67), she is asking *for what reason* a woman has sex with men. For material gain? To satisfy an urge? For ‘sport’? Out of ‘frailty’? As part of a power struggle with one’s partner – as a way of trying to control his behavior?⁴⁷ If none of these ‘reasons’ satisfy Desdemona, then it is because she sees them all as institutionalized forms of what I have been calling sexual domination, gendered hierarchy. And she is trying to understand what her dissatisfaction with sexual domination says about *her* – what *she* or any woman in her position, under patriarchal conditions, might reasonably seek by craving a different form of sexual engagement with a powerful man. *Why should I make love with Othello, rather than someone else? What satisfaction can lovemaking afford me – given the risks involved, given institutionalized sexual domination?*

I am not suggesting that Desdemona (or that any of us) finally arrives at *the* final answer to these questions – only that Desdemona’s dissatisfaction with the available answers spur her onward. (“God me such uses send / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!” (IV.iii.103-4).) Thus, having been commanded to await Othello in bed, Desdemona prepares herself. Not that she mechanically follows instructions. Desdemona wants to know whether she can make love with Othello, in this particular setting – given his rage and his abusive behavior; given Emilia’s doubts; given her own excitement and misgivings; given the patriarchal institutions of sexual domination. Desdemona takes up these questions by undressing, by looking in the mirror. She is young and beautiful, and she knows it; she sees the evidence reflected in the mirror and feels it in her bones. The experience of her own body – of her anatomy, of the way her

⁴⁶ This shows at IV.ii.97ff in her halting exchange with Emilia, which follows immediately upon Othello’s accusation.

⁴⁷ Each of these is named in the exchange. See IV.iii.59ff.

flesh betrays her excitement and desires, the way her voluptuousness signals her desirability – all this belongs to the sense she makes of herself and her conditions. “Shall I go fetch your night-gown?”, asks Emilia. “No”, answers Desdemona, “unpin me here” (IV.iii.32-33).

In order to know whether she can make love – negate natural impulses and sexual domination – she will give Othello the right to make love to her, or take her life. To have her own way, she will let him have his way with her. Is this freedom?

I hear one response in Giuseppe Verdi’s arrangement – when the harsh, relentless strings of Othello’s violence give way to Desdemona’s voice, hanging in the air. Not even respiration is involuntary, if she can let it be stopped by another. *Nessuno [...] io stessa*.

Verdi was right to hear the source of opera’s ‘undoing of women’ in Shakespeare’s play – echoes of which already begin to reverberate in Monteverdi’s *Lasciatemi morire* (1607-8), and which resound in every subsequent opera in which a woman ‘dies’ at the hands of her lover. But if “on the opera stage women perpetually sing their own undoing”, as Catherine Clément memorably put it, then this is not because opera stages the subjugation of women in a sequential plot or story⁴⁸. Shakespeare and Verdi present not merely Desdemona’s murder, but also the way Desdemona lives it out. The operatic voice (the *melo*) stages how the woman *feels* or experiences what is happening to her (the *drama*, or story) – it gives that subjective experience an objective, clamorous, undeniable reality⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Clément misdiagnoses opera as the “eternal undoing” of women precisely because she is “determined to pay attention to the language, the forgotten part of opera”. “I am going to talk about women and their operatic stories”, she writes, “I am going to commit the sacrilege of listening to the words, reading the libretti, following the twisted, tangled plots”, Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, pp. 5, 12. Had she heard Shakespeare’s words as musically as Verdi did, she would not have so neatly separated the plot from the woman’s vocalized experience of it. For a critique of Clément, see Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci. Per una filosofia dell’espressione vocale*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2003.

⁴⁹ W. H. Auden puts the thought this way: “The singer may be playing the role of a deserted bride who is about to kill herself, but we feel quite certain as we listen that not only we, but also she, is having a wonderful time [...] whatever errors the

Her death is not experienced as sexual subjugation or obedience. She has given another the right to destroy her. Under the circumstances, it is the only action she can make sense of as her own.

characters make and whatever they suffer, they are doing exactly what they wish". In his commentary on this remark, Bernard Williams suggests that Auden's diagnosis is only correct insofar as it concerns the "musical artistry and achievement" of "the aesthetics of opera". I disagree: I think (and I think Auden thinks) that opera manages to present, and make sense of, the way in which sexual agency is achieved by women through their *self*-undoing – perhaps the only form of agency available to women under stark patriarchal conditions. See W. H. Auden, "Notes on Music and Opera", in *The Dyer's Hand*, New York, Random House, 1962; Bernard Williams, *On Opera*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008.