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"I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak": Toni Morrison's Desdemona *as an Expansion to the Interpretation of* Othello

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Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* is a sort of prequel and sequel to Shakespeare's *Othello,* a drama which includes Rokia Traoré, a Malian singer, and stage director Peter Sellars, which aims at giving voice and prominence to the women in the play with particular emphasis on the barely mentioned Barbary in Shakespeare's work. The interest lies also in this hybrid reading which mixes adaptation, appropriation and intertextuality and lends itself to postcolonial studies and feminist criticism. The aim of this paper is to try to demonstrate how Morrison's work sheds new light on Shakespeare's tragedy amplifying possibilities of interpretation.

Keywords: *Othello*, Toni Morrison, *Desdemona*, adaptation, intertextuality

Introduction

Emilia's words quoted in the title, which finally disclose her husband's plot towards the end of the play, show the final rejection of the virtues of silence and obedience displayed by the women in Shakespeare's *Othello*[1] (V.ii.185) which Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2023)[2] seeks to subvert. Though it has been argued that the original Desdemona does have an 'active' role in choosing to marry Othello without telling her father and then demanding to go to Cyprus with him, that Emilia presents an almost proto-feminist attitude in her words on

1 All subsequent quotations are from Shakespeare 1994 [1958] and are cited parenthetically in the text.

2 All quotations are from Morrison 2023 [2012] and are cited parenthetically in the text.

equality between men and women and that even Bianca attempts to hold her own when Cassio asks her to copy the work out of the fated handkerchief, there seems little doubt that, as Carol Thomas Neely observes, "The men's profound anxieties and murderous fantasies cannot be restrained by the women's affection, wit and shrewdness. The play ends as it began, in a world of men – political, loveless, undomesticated" (Neely 1987, 84)[3] and the female characters throughout the play are mostly told to keep quiet, to go home, to obey; an imposed silence which reaches its apotheosis with the smothering of Desdemona in the last scene.

Toni Morrison is not the first to have chosen to re-evaluate the character of Desdemona from a radical 'feminist' point of view, moving away from the more conventional interpretations which have viewed her as silent, submissive woman. For instance, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* a comedy by Anne-Marie MacDonald, first performed in Toronto in 1988 and then published in 1990, and *Desdemona: a Play about a Handkerchief* by Paula Vogel, published in 1994, aim at offering a transgressive and daring character which completely reconfigures Shakespeare's Desdemona (see Carney 2022, 21). Nadia Fusini has also dealt with Shakespeare's women, and in Desdemona's case has placed emphasis on a strongly erotically charged wife, her determination to be with her husband, and her powerful yearning to consummate the marriage (Fusini 2021, 29). This aspect is particularly evident in the resolute reply Shakespeare's Desdemona delivers to the Duke and Senators, a completely male authoritative audience, in the Council Chamber scene where Brabantio had accused Othello of having abused and corrupted his daughter with "spells and medicines":

> That I love thee More to live with him,
> My downright violence and storm of fortunes
> May trumpet to the world. My heart subdued
> Even to the very quality of my lord: […]
> Let me go with him.
> (*Othello*, I.iii.248-51; 259)

Passages such as this have induced Morrison to a reconsideration of Desdemona; in an informal interview with Jerry Brotton, she asserts:

3 Originally in Neely 1985.

> This [Desdemona] is a really extraordinary character […] not for the obvious reasons. Let's think about it. What is it? Fourteen hundreds or something Venice? She runs away from home [she should be in a convent or jail or something. I mean, nobody runs away from home from that class. And she turns down everybody that they've offered her as a husband […] she meets this one guy, he starts telling her stories, she's breathless and then they run away and get married. She goes to war with him. She meddles in his business. You know, she not this little [in a submissive voice] Desdemona. You know, I saw her stronger, more complex, more interesting than the performances I have seen and that's what I saw in the play[4].

In one of the most exhaustive studies on Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*, Jo Eldridge Carney recounts its origin; she relates an encounter between theatre director Peter Sellars and Morrison in which, whilst discussing Shakespeare's *Othello*, Sellars complained about its stereotypical main characters and considered it, all in all, a rather "thin play" (Carney 2022, 9). Morrison objected that Desdemona had more depth in her than productions generally conceded (as we have just seen from the interview with Brotton) but admitted that Othello's unfortunate wife deserved more attention and, particularly, a more complete biography. Whence, Sellars' challenge: to try to tell the 'missing story'. They decided to engage the Malian musician and singer Rokia Traoré and to produce what was to become an intermedial, hybrid, transnational and transcultural revision/adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy.

This theatre production – it would be reductive to call it just 'a play' – has received critical attention primarily as a feminist, post-colonial rewriting of *Othello*, with emphasis on race, gender and social class issues, but also for its innovative theatricality involving monologues and dialogues interspersed with songs and voices off stage, and a written backdrop with the text behind a practically bare stage, a remarkable new performative experiment which defies definition (Erickson 2013; Carney 2014; Kitts 2014; Guarracino 2015; Chamber 2016; Iyengar 2016; Cucarella-Ramón 2017; Rapetti 2022). Most of the critical essays mentioned concentrate on what is certainly central to Morrison's new version of Shakespeare's tragedy: its readjust-

4 *Toni Morrison talks to Jerry Brotton*, Hay-on-Wye Festival, 2014: https://www.hayfestival.com/p-8106-toni-morrison-talks-to-jerry-brotton.aspx?skinid=16.

ment to render it a feminist, transnational, hybrid work. Cucarella-Ramón, for instance, comparing Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* with *Desdemona*, focuses on the study of black identity construction in the United States and in Canada, rewriting social and racial subjectivity and defining the black female self. Similarly, Rapetti's paper reflects on the transcultural and transmedial nature of the production which, by involving artists from different geographical locations, harks back to the Black diaspora coexisting with materialistic feminism. Once again, the emphasis lies in the African issue manifesting itself through the presence and voice of a black woman. Instead, Guarracino's study views the African presence through a careful analysis of music in both *Desdemona* and *Margaret Garner*, a 2005 opera, neither of which is set in Africa but which both, according to the author, enact a memory of pre-Middle Passage experience precisely through the use of music. Erickson, on the other hand, concentrates on the bond created among the female characters and particularly the further development of Desdemona beyond the Shakespearian frame. As these few examples demonstrate, the main critical focus is on the revision of gender roles and race issues. These certainly constitute the main innovations presented by Morrison and provide the necessary framework for the interpretation of the production. All these aspects are crucial and are implied in my article, but my main interest is to demonstrate how this revision functions also as a supplement to the interpretation of Shakespeare's *Othello* in its entirety. For instance, the full biographies of the two protagonists provided in *Desdemona* affect our reading of the source text, supplying new perspectives to our understanding of the play. This is also true for Othello, whose naïveté in accepting Iago's insinuations has puzzled readers; and even Cassio's minor appearance in *Desdemona* reveals aspects unseen in Shakespeare's play and invites consideration. As Carney observes, quoting Tom Stoppard's adaptation of *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), if anyone revisited Shakespeare's play after having read or seen Stoppard's, they would "presumably find the absurdity and portent of the two lackeys – whom they may have previously dismissed – now difficult to ignore" (Carney 2022, 5). Reading or watching Morrison's *Desdemona*, I shall try to argue, produces a similar effect when rereading *Othello*.

With respect to the many revisions and adaptations of *Othello*[5] Morrison's play represents both a prequel and a sequel to Shakespeare's play. All the characters speak (or rather are spoken for, since the actress playing Desdemona recites all the parts, except that of Barbary) from their afterlife, commenting on their story, unfolding the details of their past, their childhood and traumas, before *Othello* begins. It also, and importantly, gives voice and presence to the females who are merely mentioned in Shakespeare and who instead, in Morrison's work, appear as significant co-protagonists of the production. This latter adaptive strategy, with its forceful reclaiming of space and voice for the female characters, best fits in with Gérard Genette's words: "The revaluation of a character consists in investing him or her – by way of pragmatic or psychological transformation – with a more significant and/or more 'attractive' role in the value system of the hypertext than was the case in the hypotext" (Genette 1997, 158). As Sellars (2012, 7) states in his brief forward:

> Toni Morrison has created fiction that imagines, evokes and honors the missing histories of generations whose courage, struggles, achievements, loves, tragedies, fulfilments and disappointments have gone unrecorded, but are still very much with us.

Adaptations, generally, shed new light on source texts and invite their reappraisal; for Adrienne Rich "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival […] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it" (Rich 1979, 35). This is certainly true in the case of *Desdemona*, in which female characters come to the fore, in many ways reversing the male centred universe of *Othello*, but which can also be read, as previously mentioned, as a useful expansion to the world of Shakespeare's play.

5 See for instance, Oliver Stone's film with Lawrence Fishburne casting an actor of colour as Othello (1995), Vishal Bhardway's film *Omkara* set as a contemporary crime drama (2006); or Derek Walcott's poem "Goats and Monkeys" (1965), Talib Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) both focussing on racial oppression; Djanet Sear's play *Harlem Duet* (1997), a sort of prequel to the story, and many others (see Carney 2022, 10).

The Performance: A Brief Synopsis

Desdemona was first performed in Vienna in 2011, then throughout Europe, to America and back to London for the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012. No full-length video or recording exists to my knowledge, but there are some brief YouTube clips which allow us to follow some of the musical components of the production and some of its scenes. The text was published in 2012 with a brief forward by director Peter Sellars, and interviews and reviews with Morrison, Traoré and Sellars himself providing interesting insights for those who have not seen the production (Sciolino 2011; Zinoman 2011; Brokaw 2012; Denselow 2012; Cornwell 2015; Dow 2015).

The performance is divided into ten scenes composed by monologues and dialogues between two people, interspersed with songs. In the first scene Desdemona introduces herself and in the second she recounts her childhood and youth; it is here that Barbary is mentioned, that same Barbary who is cited in Shakespeare's 'willow scene' as Desdemona's mother's maid who "had a song of "willow" / An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune, / And she died singing it; that song to-night / Will not go from my mind" (IV.iii.28-31). Barbary's role is expanded and in Morrison's work she acts almost as a catalyst for Desdemona's subsequent passion for Othello. She is Desdemona's nanny, an affectionate surrogate mother, fundamentally responsible for her upbringing:

> […] To hear
> Barbary sing was to wonder at the mediocrity
> of flutes and pipes. She was more alive than
> anyone I knew and more loving. (18)

This is apparently Desdemona's first contact with the exoticism of otherness and induces audience or readers to believe that it strongly influenced her infatuation with the 'other' African. In the third scene she remembers her father trying to find a suitable husband for her, and in the fourth she finally meets Othello "I saw a glint of brass in his eyes identical to the light in Barbary's eyes" (23). The fourth scene tells the story of their falling in love. All the other scenes except the sixth and the seventh, in which Othello tells the story of his past, exhibit honest confrontations between two characters: Soun (Othello's moth-

er) and M. Brabantio (scene 5), Desdemona and Emilia (scene 8), and finally Desdemona and Barbary (scene 9), in which Barbary appears with her real name, Sa'ran, a sign of reappropriation of her origins. The last scene presents the two fated lovers but closes with the idea of peace, respect and communion, though not complete reconciliation.

The Heroine and the Missing Villain

One of Morrison's main objectives, possibly a controversial one, is the absence of Iago, who is only mentioned and whose actions continue to be disruptive, but who does not actually appear. The reason for this is made clear in the afore mentioned interview of the author with Jerry Brotton (2014):

> I was very dismissive of Iago. As I said, I refused to do the play unless Peter permitted me to get rid of Iago altogether. Out. Because he's everywhere, he's talking constantly, nobody's telling him the truth, he's manipulating everybody. See, he's gobbling up the play […] It was so liberating, in the writing and in the imagination, to get rid of the character who is manipulating everybody; to see what it would be like, what they would say to one another if he wasn't there[6].

The performance significantly begins with the self-presentation of Desdemona in a monologue which amplifies the meaning of a name and what being born a woman entails.

> My name is Desdemona. The word,
> Desdemona means misery. It means ill
> fated. It means doomed. Perhaps my parents
> believed or imagined or knew my fortune
> at the moment of my birth. Perhaps
> being born a girl gave them all they needed to
> know of what my life would be like. That it
> would be subject to the whims of my elders
> and control of men. Certainly that
> was the standard, no, the obligation of females
> in Venice when I was a girl. Men made the
> rules. Women followed them. A step away
> was doom, indeed and misery without relief.

6 *Toni Morrison talks to Jerry Brotton*, Hay-on-Wye Festival, 2014.

> My parents, keenly aware and approving of
> that system, could anticipate the future of a girl child accurately.
>
> They were wrong. They knew the system
> but they didn't know me.
>
> I am not the meaning of a name I did not
> choose.
> (Morrison 2023, 13)

This opening monologue can be read as supplying the missing social context in which Shakespeare's play is set, providing the historical cultural atmosphere of Venice, clearly only implied in *Othello*, and the treatment women were subjected to. In fact, Morrison expands, rather than invents, giving greater insight into a feasible 'backstory' of Desdemona's upbringing. Historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford in their study on *Women in Early Modern England*, describe the gender prejudices of early modern childrearing: "Most girls remained with their families, where they were educated by their mothers. They were taught to behave differently from boys. They were to be restrained, and to preserve their chastity" (Mendelson and Crawford 1998, 80). Morrison's Desdemona perceived this rearing as confinement, and restoring Desdemona's voice alerts us to the fact she is now talking as an adult and can reconsider her past rather more analytically: "I can speak, at last, words that in earth were sealed or twisted into the language of obedience" (Morrison 2023, 14); in so doing she transports the audience with her and, in my view, adds dimension to the hypotext, opening up for readers and spectators of Shakespeare an added perspective.

Barbary: the Surrogate Mother

The following sections probe deeper into Desdemona's upbringing, and particularly into the role of her mother who is virtually absent in Shakespeare's play; she informs us that her mother was "a lady of virtue whose practice and observation of manners was flawless" and who taught her how to be courteous in speech and how to drop [her] eyes, smile, courtesy", but most of all, "she did not tolerate dispute from a child, nor involve herself in what could be called [her] inner

life. There were strict rules of deportment […] And there was sensible punishment designed for each impropriety" (Morrison 2023, 17)[7]. This absence of a mother's interest in a daughter's inner life, accentuated by the anecdote Desdemona tells of being severely punished as a child for having splashed barefooted in a pond, a most 'ungirlish' thing to do, induced the young Desdemona to believe that her desires, her "imagination must remain hidden. It was as though", she says, a "dark heavy curtain enclosed me". But it was this, she claims, that served instead to strengthen her wilfulness (17). It is at this point that we are introduced, in open opposition to the neglect and constraints imposed on the young girl by her biological family, to Desdemona's surrogate yet liberating mother, whereas the father remains rather in the background and exercises his paternal duty simply by searching for an adequate husband for his daughter.

> My solace in those early days lay with my
> Nurse, Barbary. She alone conspired with
> Me to let my imagination run free. She told
> Me stories of other lives, other countries […]
> Unlike the staid, unbending women of my country, she
> Moved the fluid grace I saw only in swans and the fronds of willow trees […]
> She was more alive than
> anyone I knew and more loving, she tended
> me as though she were my birth mother:
> braided my hair, dressed me, comforted me
> when I was ill and danced with me when I recovered. I loved her.
> (Morrison 2023, 18)

As Sellars mentions in his preface, in Shakespeare's time "Barbary" meant Africa. "The Barbary pirates were hijacking British vessels off the coast of Africa, enslaving their white, British crews. In 1600, a delegation of ambassadors from the Barbary court, Africans of high degree, splendidly dressed, arrived in London to negotiate with Queen Elizabeth" (Sellars 2012, 8). The word Barbary appears once at the beginning of *Othello* when Iago cautions Brabantio he will have his daughter "cover'd with a Barbary horse" (I.i.111) after her elopement with the Moor, thus establishing the first connection with the African continent, but as a name it is mentioned in the fa-

7 On the virtual absence of Shakespeare's mothers see Rose 1991, 291-314.

mous 'unpinning scene' or 'willow scene' whilst Emilia is undressing Desdemona following Othello's command to prepare her for what will become her death-bed:

> My mother had a maid called Barbary,
> She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad
> And did forsake her; she had a song of "willow"
> An old thing 'twas but it express'd her fortune,
> And she died singing it; that song tonight
> Will not go from my mind.
> (IV.iii.26-31)

This brief reference is taken up by Morrison who builds a solid, loving relationship between Desdemona and her maid, as seen in the previous quotation where Barbary represents spontaneity and generosity as opposed to Desdemona's mother's strictness and mostly to her attention to outward behaviour rather than being or feeling. This fuller characterization of Barbary implies Othello is not the first black person Desdemona meets and his seductive and exotic tales are a reminder of her childhood memories. We hear of Barbary's death as a result of her lover's betrayal and Desdemona's desperation; this leads her to seek the truth in a lover before committing her own fidelity. Whilst Brabantio's only interest is in securing his daughter into the hands of another man by inviting noble Venetians to the house, she yearns for men "living in other ways" and she longs for adventure but, significantly "Adventures in [her] mind no less than in [her] heart (Morrison 2023, 22). Once again, this functions as a reasonable explanation of what we hear in *Othello* when Brabantio exclaims that it is not possible that his daughter has purposely chosen the Moor as her husband: Desdemona "a maid, so tender, fair, and happy, / So opposed to marriage, that she shunn'd / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (I.ii.66-8). Finally, she meets Othello, whose eyes remind her of her lost Barbary, and in the fourth section of the play their meeting and falling in love is recounted. Probably, as Erickson observes, "Desdemona circumvents and perhaps prematurely short-circuits, her deep loss of Barbary […] The compressed overlapping of the two events maps Barbary onto Othello, making Othello almost a Barbary substitute. But Morrison's play enables Desdemona to differentiate between these two figures through her respective encounters in the afterlife" (Erickson 2013,

7). As this amplification of Desdemona's past with the invented, yet plausible, relationship with Barbary demonstrates, Morrison's play is firmly grounded in a close reading of *Othello* and what is striking is how the 'old story' gains a profitable supplement, one which adds to its interpretations even in this process of revision aimed at breaking new ground. It is in this sense that *Desdemona* is not only an adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy but also a conceivable *explanation* of what generations of critics have pondered over. Somehow when we reread "I saw Othello's visage in his mind / And to his honours, and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate" (I.iii.251-53), or earlier when we hear of Othello's wondrous tales and disastrous chances which Desdemona would devour with her "greedy ear" (see I.iii.127-70), the full story of their mutual attraction acquires new meaning. This will become clearer as the performance progresses; in Morrison's play the courting scene ends with an unambiguous "I adore you" from Desdemona to which Othello replies "I love you. Turn away old world, while my love and I create a new one" (Morrison 2023, 25), reminding us of the unlimited love between Antony and Cleopatra which needed to find "new heaven, new earth" to be embodied, such was its boundlessness (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I.i.17)[8]. This idyllic moment between the lovers, however, reveals its true nature after the fifth section where the mothers of Desdemona and Othello, both mentioned but neither present in Shakespeare's play, meet in compliance with Morrison's desire to give voice to female characters and their relationship, a scene we will return to.

Othello's Story and his Secrets

The following two sections which provide Othello with his own backstory also offer realistic details which may be interpreted as illuminating the hypotext. We must not forget that it is the same actress playing Desdemona who also channels the other characters, the only other voice being that of Rokia Traorè, as mentioned, who sings the songs which offer commentaries on the actions, which reference African traditions, and impersonates Barbary. Othello's narrative is therefore also spoken through a female voice, though the story is

8 The edition used is Shakespeare 1993 [1954].

clearly his own. We are told Othello is an orphan, adopted by a "root woman" who much like Barbary brings him up in a world of nature and love for music:

> She worshipped the natural world and
> Encouraged me to rehearse certain songs to divine its power.
> (Morrison 2023, 31)

But this maternal love ends when he is captured by Syrians and quickly learns the art of war. His words are telling: "Only as a soldier could I excel and turn the loneliness inside to exhilaration" (31). Carney observes that the "immersion into a violent military milieu challenges Shakespeare's representation of Othello as noble warrior and great general" (Carney 2014, 29). Yet his boyish enthusiasm for the military world, "I was happy, breathless and hungry for more violent encounters" (Morrison 2023, 31), as a means to escape his inner loneliness, can, once again, in my view, constitute a more comprehensive enlightenment for the Shakespearian Othello's insecurity when faced with domestic issues, such as his relationship with his wife, rather than warfare: that "loneliness" still inhabits him. He had admitted his weaknesses to the Duke and Senators of Venice himself when asked to explain his elopement with Desdemona in Shakespeare's text:

> Rude am I in my speech
> And little blest with the set phrase of peace,
> For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
> Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us'd
> Their dearest action in the tented field,
> And little of this great world can I speak
> More than pertains to feats of broil, and battle.
> (I.iii.81-87)

And his basic insecurity emerged strongly after Iago instilled in him the suspicion of his wife's infidelity:

> Haply, for I am black,
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have, or for I'm declined
> Into the vale of years
> (III.iii.266-70)

The tales of his adventures in *Desdemona* reflect and possibly surpass the outlandishness of his Shakespearian counterpart but maintain the echo of the original: "the islanders have no heads and their faces are settled in their chests" (Morrison 2023, 33) almost paraphrases "men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders (I.iii.144-45). Yet, in keeping with the hypotext, Morrison adds disturbing details to what a soldier's life may have entailed and what, we may choose to surmise, the "valiant Moor" had omitted. Desdemona is enchanted by the tales and, unsurprisingly, attracted by the story of the powerful Amazon women who are stronger than men and who Desdemona would like to compete with. But the disturbing scene occurs when Morrison's Othello confesses that during these wars "rape was perfunctory" (Morrison 2023, 36) and most of all when he recounts his own experience with the complicity of Iago. All we hear in the Shakespearian text is that Othello and Iago had fought together in the past when, in the opening scene with Roderigo, we witness Iago's venomous tirade against Cassio who has been chosen over him to be the Moor's lieutenant, a man, he claims, "That never set a squadron in the field / Nor the division of a battle knows" (I.i.23-24). Othello, on the other hand, had seen Iago at work with his very eyes "At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds, / Christian and heathen" (I.i.22; 29-30) and this should have been reason enough to make the right choice, that is, to prefer Iago. But we have no details of the armed conflicts, or of Iago's or indeed Othello's actions during these battles. In *Desdemona* the tale of horror emerges: Othello confesses that "Aroused by bloodletting" he and Iago entered a stable where they found two women who were "old, so old. Fingers gnarled by years of brutal work" (Morrison 2023, 37), but despite that they raped them repeatedly: "I don't know how long it lasted. Our groans and their soft crying drape my memory of passing time" (37) says Othello who adds to this horrific act the fact that they found that a young boy had watched the whole scene. This exchange of secrecy as Othello calls it, creates a bond between the two men and when Desdemona asks whether they felt shame Othello's reply is significant:

> You don't understand. Shame, yes, but
> Worse. There was pleasure too. The look
> Between us was not to acknowledge shame,
> But mutual pleasure, Pleasure in the

> Degradation we had caused; more pleasure
> In leaving a witness to it. We were not
> Only refusing to kill our own memory, but
> Insisting on its life in another. (38)

In war zones male alliances often result "from shared atrocities, a propensity for cruelty and toxic masculinity that often carries into the civilian world" (Carney 2014, 30). This male bonding between Othello and Iago created by their shared violence is another of Morrison's expansions which may help Shakespearian readers and critics to imagine the reasons for Othello's total trust in his Ancient. In other words, we don't know what the two did when fighting at Rhodes or Cyprus, but there is no doubt, as Desdemona observes in the later play, that there was a sense of brotherhood amongst the two men, "Bright, tight, camaraderie […] The wide, wild celebrity men find with each other cannot compete with the narrow comfort of a wife" (Morrison 2023, 37). Proving that male bonding is ultimately destructive as opposed to female bonding which is, eventually, beneficial in spite of initial confrontations, is of course Toni Morrison's main objective as we shall see in the three female-to-female scenes, yet the idea of possible unspoken events, which make Shakespeare's Othello so trusting of Iago, gives us a further viewpoint in approaching the play. Much has been said about the homosocial or even homoerotic possible relation between Othello and Iago, particularly after the 'temptation scene' with its repeated expressions of mutual love and dependency: "I'm bound to thee forever" (III.iii.218) says Othello and "I am your own for ever" (III.iii.486) concludes Iago after they have both knelt in what has been interpreted as a symbolic marriage between comrades. In fact, as Melissa Sanchez observes, "the word 'love' expresses the bonds between Cassio, Iago, and Othello at least as insistently as that between Othello and Desdemona" (Sanchez 2020, 126). But whether or not there is an underlying strain of homoeroticism in Shakespeare's play, there is no doubt that Othello believes Iago's insinuations and refuses Desdemona and Emilia's objections until the end. In *Desdemona* Morrison fully embraces the interpretation of the many critics who maintain that Iago would not have found such fertile ground in Othello, in his gullibility, if it hadn't been for the fact that Othello had the idea of his wife's unfaithfulness already planted inside him. Berger, for instance, goes as far as assuming that

Iago's responsibility is exaggerated and that "If it all happens with startling rapidity, that's because it has already happened […] It is almost too late [for Iago] to do further harm. The rapidity with which they destroy their relation makes him all but belated and dispensable" (Berger 2013, 137). The assumption, in Morrison's play, is that it was this sense of brotherhood which provoked the tragedy as Desdemona herself says:

> My husband knew Iago was lying,
> Manipulating, sabotaging. So why did he
> act on obvious deceit? Brotherhood. The
> quiet approval beamed from one male
> eye to another. Bright, tight camaraderie.
> (Morrison 2023, 37)

Nevertheless after the admission of the rape, when Othello asks whether he can be forgiven, Desdemona replies she cannot, yet adds, "But I can love you and remain committed to you" (37), and then proceeds to give her description of love, a female vision where honest love is complete and remains constant even after confessions of such sinful behaviour, whereas Othello expects pity, seeks forgiveness thus avoiding self-examination (Erickson 2013, 6). The line which closes the section takes us back to *Othello* where Desdemona explains to the Duke "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" implying her indifference to outward appearance and her belief that true love springs from knowledge of interiority; here she says "My error was in believing that you were more than the visage of your mind" (Morrison 2023, 39), acknowledging her old naïveté whilst the new, mature, Desdemona has become aware – but only in her afterlife – of the true nature of her husband. But Morrison's Othello too has gained insight: the final scene which terminates the play offers clarification of the two protagonists' inner lives which also may serve as a critical evaluation of *Othello*. Othello asks Desdemona why she didn't fight back when he was strangling her, why she denied that he had murdered her and she replies she was not being killed by the man she knew, so it no longer mattered to her: "My Othello is not the man who chose to believe what you must have known was false" (50). Othello's words, which must be read in the context of Morrison's play, may seem to ring true even when thinking back to Shakespeare's play:

> You never loved me. You
> fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner
> who kills for the State, who will die for the
> State. […] What excited
> you was my strange story: enslaved youth
> ruined by war then redeemed by it, fantastic
> adventures, stories of freaks and miracles. […]
> And you thought that was all there was to
> me – a useful myth, a fairy's tale cut to suit
> a princess' hunger for real life, not the dull
> existence of her home. (51)

The themes of pity, the excitement of Shakespeare's Desdemona over Othello's stories can easily be summarised in Othello's recounting of his courtship in the Senate room "She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd / And I love'd her that she did pity them" (I.iii.167-68). This is, of course, a dangerously thin premise for a fully successful relationship, but through Morrison's words its true vulnerability becomes more apparent. Othello continues his version of the story expounding the difficulties and hardships he had to sustain to reach his position, his own reality which, in his view, she turned into a "spectacle".

It is at this point that we have Cassio's interjection, a voice off stage, in which he too tells his tale which offers no kind words for the protagonists. He admits to his weakness for drinking but accuses the drunkenness which led to his demotion to a trickery. He insinuates Desdemona's innocence is highly inflated and that she never refused his approaches; he acknowledges Othello's competence but found him unfit as a leader and is proud that Cyprus is now under his reign: "I am the one who decides. Othello gone from life, Iago suffering in a prison cell. A clean sweep which allows me to rule and perhaps help Venice to return to its prominence" His final assumption is that "Power is more than responsibility; it is destiny" (Morrison 2023, 53). Cassio is given an arrogant portrayal in this play compared to his Shakespearian counterpart, but the question of destiny is put forward to imply that a black man, however valiant, could never have been given full rule over a Venetian province, hence tying in with one of Morrison's major themes, the succumbing not just of women but of blacks. The theme is taken up by Othello himself who admits not to have ever liked Cassio but to have believed him loyal whereas he was deceived: "why" he asks, "Because I am African, Because I was sold to slavery? (53).

Female Encounters

The interracial question is of course central to *Desdemona*, as are the misogynistic and social class issues exposing inequalities on several levels. Before analysing the final pages of the work which reroute the individual relationship of Othello and Desdemona towards a broader vision, it is essential to see how these themes have been highlighted particularly in the three encounters which occur amongst the females, only one of which has a counterpart in *Othello*: that with Emilia.

The first, in section five, is the meeting between Soun, Othello's adoptive mother, and Madame Brabantio, Desdemona's mother, who, in Vincent Cucarella-Ramón's words "get a voice and engage in a healing debate with the purpose of bridging difference with regard to class and race" (Cucarella-Ramón 2017, 91). Their difference is marked by their clothing, "One is dressed in simple cloth, the other in a sumptuous gown. They both have white hair and carry a torch" (Morrison 2023, 26), and they may never have had the possibility to meet and talk on equal terms on earth, but in the afterlife all seems possible. The women introduce themselves and when they discover one is the murderer of the other's daughter Soun exclaims "are we enemies then?" to which M. Brabantio replies: "Of course. Our vengeance is more molten than our sorrow" (26). Morrison is careful not to rush her women into easy, sentimental empathy; they initially express their rage but slowly recognize their common sorrow: "yet we have much to share" says Soun and "Both died in and for love" (27). They kneel together but cannot pray together because they have different gods, but they choose to build an altar to the spirits who will console them. It is interesting to note that it is the African Soun who teaches the western Brabantio about gods and spirits; sharing each other's pain, learning one from the other, they overcome their differences in class and race and open up at least the possibility of a multiethnic society. What form this consolatory gesture might take is left to the subsequent encounters with the other two women, "but the prospect of female collaboration has been broached" (Erickson 2013, 8).

This breaking down of racial boundaries occurs even more vividly in Desdemona's encounter with Barbary who, as we have recalled, is only mentioned in *Othello* as Madame Brabantio's maid, was betrayed by her husband and died singing the "willow song" we hear

in Shakespeare (IV.iii.26-30). In *Desdemona* we have heard much about her, but only from the protagonist's point of view and now we finally hear her own voice and her own version of the story. Once again, the encounter begins with a confrontation which is also a cultural exchange between Africa and Europe and between different social classes. The Venetian girl is initially thrilled by this meeting, "Barbary! Barbary. Come closer. How I have missed you […] we shared so much", but is soon put straight by the African maid who, much like Desdemona, does not identify with her name:

> We shared nothing
> […]
> I mean you don't even know my name.
> Barbary? Barbary is what you call Africa.
> Barbary is the geography of the foreigner,
> the savage. Barbary? Barbary equals the
> sly, vicious enemy who must be put down
> at any price; held down at any cost for the
> conquerors pleasure. Barbary is the name of
> those without whom you could neither live
> nor prosper.
> (Morrison 2023, 45)

She says her real name is Sa'ran, which means joy, and when Desdemona tries to interject remembering they were best friends, she is once again contradicted by Sa'ran "I was your slave […] I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned. […] So you don't know me. Have never known me" (45-46). But Desdemona insists that colour is no issue, that she married a black man and when Sa'ran says he ended up slaughtering her she replies that Sa'ran had the same fate. Cucarella-Ramón observes that giving Sa'ran subjectivity and power to voice her own truth Toni Morrison is "inserting herself into history and voicing Africa for the first time in a Shakespearian story" (Cucarella-Ramón 2017, 92). The new version of the willow song which in *Othello* foreboded tragedy here functions as a restoration of black subjectivity. In spite of Desdemona's insistence on her sincere love for her surrogate mother, Sa'ran now places emphasis on the difference in their social status: "I have no rank in your world. I do what I'm told, I brought you what you wanted before you knew you wanted it" (Morrison 2023, 48). Despite these confrontations they find something to share: Sa'ran, Desde-

mona says, "We are women. I had no more control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was prison still" (48). The section ends with the repetition of the willow song, which this time gives hope: "I will never die again" sings Sa'ran, "We will never die again" echoes Desdemona (49). They both acknowledge the injustice they have had to endure: both locked up in prisons which constrained them to social norms they did not choose; both were killed by the men they loved. Morrison is not trying here to change the past, but to transcend it in the afterlife: they will no longer just be victimized women. Mutual revelation, and then acceptance, is a prerogative of the female characters, though, as we shall see in the conclusion, something similar occurs with Desdemona and Othello. Nevertheless, this encounter allows for different interpretations; in Lenore Kitts' view "Desdemona's dialogue with Barbary […] functions to expose and transform the wounded identities at the heart of Shakespeare's play" (Kitts 2014, 259). Though it can be argued that in the utopia of the afterlife, free from racial and political constraints, peaceful mutual recognition can be reached, according to Ayanna Thompson this particular meeting is not clear in its ultimate message. Basing herself on the production in which Rokia Traoré impersonates Sa'ran she observes that Traoré does not seem much interested in Tina Benko, interpreting Desdemona, and this is possibly a hint that total reconciliation is ultimately impossible:

> Desdemona responds, "We will never die again", rendering her understanding of Sa'ran and Sa'ran's song unclear. Are we to interpret Desdemona's inclusion of her own suffering with Sa'ran as an epiphany about their conjoined future in the after world? Or is it merely a return to the unthinking collapse of all female suffering, one that implicitly whitewashes the unequal treatment of black and white bodies? "While the text is ambiguous, the performance by Traoré as Sa'ran makes the distance between Desdemona and her former slave immense. While they occupy the same tightly focused space onstage for the entirety of the production, the gulf between Sa'ran and Desdemona seems almost unsurmountable" (Thompson 2016, 503).

Thompson's view is that Desdemona must come to terms with her own privileged position as a rich white woman and she slowly grows in self-perception in her meeting with Emilia which also involves confrontation but represents female conviviality and Desdemona's final questioning of her own beliefs.

This encounter, which precedes that with Barbary, once again begins with divergencies but reaches solidarity. In *Othello*, as Carney notes, Emilia is Desdemona's lady-in-waiting, but their intimacy is made quite clear and in the hierarchy of social positions she "occupied a liminal status: she was neither a working-class servant not quite Desdemona's equal" (Carney 2022, 17). They do however seem mutually supportive as Desdemona defends Emilia from Iago's misogynistic attacks and Emilia defends Desdemona against Othello's outbursts, in fact loses her own life to speak the truth. On the other hand, although unaware of her husband's plans, she is instrumental in the tragic outcome of the story through the stealing of the handkerchief and then denying she knows anything about it. Despite her almost proto-feminist argumentations when trying to convince Desdemona that infidelity has the same value for men as it has for women, she is for most of the play largely dependent on her husband and mostly obedient: "I nothing know, but for his fantasy" she says before handing over the fated handkerchief (III.iii.303).

The most extended portrayal of the Desdemona/Emilia relationship, the so called 'un-pinning scene' or 'willow scene', is where the arguments of gender inequities emerge. Emilia declares:

> Let husbands know,
> Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,
> And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
> As husbands have. What is it they do,
> When they change us for others? Is it sport? […]
> Then let them use us well: else let them know,
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.
> (IV.iii.93-96; 112-13)

This scene, one of the few scenes of female camaraderie in Shakespearian tragedy, was for centuries eliminated in performance, precisely for the references to female sexuality which contrasted with idealized womanhood; Denise Whalen observes that "the history of this scene in performance shows an unnerving disposition to still the female voice, which makes it all the more remarkable that Shakespeare wrote the scene at all" (Whalen 2007, 508). In *Desdemona* the scene opens with a rather sarcastic remark on the part of Emilia:

> Well, well. If it isn't the martyr of Venice.
> Remember me? We died together.
> How do you do?
> (Morrison 2023, 42)

But after a brief exchange the divergencies begin to surface; Desdemona accuses Emilia:

> Your deception, your dangerous
> murderous silence led to my death. And
> it led to yours. (42)

Emilia replies she resents Desdemona's statement that collapse of virtue is not survival but cowardice "coming from one who had no defence against lies or her husband's strangling fingers" (42). The argument continues with Desdemona recurring to the theme of friendship:

> You and I were friends,
> But didn't the man you knelt to protect run
> A gleaming sword through your survival strategies? (43)

The argument gets heated and, as in the case with Barbary, Emilia reminds her mistress of their respective roles. She was murdered because she supported her lady, she exposed her husband's lies, she calls Desdemona an ingrate and insists on their difference:

> That is your appreciation for my devotion to
> You? "My cloak Emilia", My gown,
> Emilia"
> "Unpin me Emilia", "Arrange my bed sheets,
> Emilia" That is not how you treat a friend;
> That's how you treat a servant. Someone beneath you, beneath your class which takes
> Devotion for granted. (43)

But the tone of the scene soon changes. Emilia reveals she was an orphan, that she believed marriage was a salvation, but she was motherless and childless and had to work, unlike Desdemona, a Senator's daughter. This modifies Desdemona's attitude; it creates a new bond between the women.

> Emilia, I wish I had known you when we
> Were children. You had no family. I had too
> Much. You had no mother. I had no mother's love. (44)

Emilia points out the difference, "an orphan knows how quickly love can be withdrawn" a statement which leads Desdemona to self-scrutiny: "You are right to correct me, she replies, instead of judging I should have been understanding" (44) The lack of parental love, albeit different, seems to unite the two women, although Desdemona is now aware of their discrepancy. The scene closes with Emilia remembering having seen a small lizard shedding its "dull outer skin" and exposing "her jeweled self" (44) with no help. What struck Emilia, apart from the brilliance of the new skin, was that she did not leave the old one behind, "As though the camouflage would still be needed to disguise her true dazzle". That little lizard changed her life, she concludes, implying her own resilience and resourcefulness. This image signals the hope of transformation, of a new self-awareness, and as Erickson remarks "This visionary model belongs not only to Emilia but also implicitly serves as inspiration for Desdemona" (Erickson 2013, 9). If we wanted to stretch the metaphor a step further, we could think of Morrison's *Desdemona* as somehow shedding the original story, the hypotext *Othello*, but inevitably carrying it with her, not as a camouflage to disguise a new dazzle, but as a necessary and integral part of her story.

Conclusion

The last two sections stress the motif of change, Emilia's life being changed by the image of the lizard and Sa'ran's statement that "with time is change" (Morrison 2023, 48). Erickson argues that these changes can be seen also on the authorial level in Morrison's relationship to Shakespeare, *Othello* being the old song and *Desdemona* the new one that brings change.

These routes from contrast to reconciliation, or at least acknowledgment, occur in the final pages which conclude Desdemona's meeting with Othello. After their mutual accusations and Cassio's interjection, again we find the emergence of a change in attitude. Desdemona apologizes to her husband "for a profound error in judgement" and Othello replies he is "beyond sorry; it is shame that strafes

[him]. And shame too for diminishing our life together as spectacle. It was never that" (Morrison 2023, 54). Self-awareness once again replaces strife; Desdemona advances her pacifist vision of life: "I am sick of killing. It solves nothing. Questions nothing, produces nothing, nothing but more of itself. […] You believed I loved Othello the warrior. I did not" (54). She thus reverses Othello's accusations of having fallen for him for his martial abilities.

This last interchange, after which Othello will speak no more, implies that he has not developed from his earthly life whilst the heroine of Morrison's play is now aware of the possibility of wisdom, which never comes too late. An optimistic interpretation of this ending may see it as a valid alternative to the tragedy of *Othello*: in Ayanna Thomson's view, "Morrison's re-vision invites the audience to imagine an alternative conclusion that enables expansion through true understanding instead of contraction through death and destruction" (Thompson 2016, 501). The two lovers finally come to acknowledge they have been victims of a given set of standards, one as a woman, the other as a black man; both are in their own way outcasts having to conquer respect from society.

Yet the differences between them are still great, one still linked to the world of war, as it was in the hypotext in Othello's presuicidal speech:

> And say besides that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and turban's Turk
> Beat a Venetian, and traduc's the state,
> I took by the throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him thus.
> (V.ii.352-56)

where he states that this is what he wishes to be remembered for, as one who loved too well if not wisely, but most of all as one who has done the state good service, an outstanding general. Desdemona instead has gained full consciousness, has matured from the Shakespearian text and now takes front line for the remaining part of the performance as Othello fades from view, or rather from the text since no prefixes introduce him anymore. From this point of view Othello has not been able to gain the full understanding granted to Desdemona. Morrison is not after the classic happy ending but rather a wider

understanding of the world, of love, of war, of friendship, of equality. From dialogue to monologue Desdemona declares:

> The world is alive and even if we kill it, it
> returns fresh, full throated and hungry for
> time and space in which to thrive. And if
> we haven't secured the passionate peace we
> yearn for, it is because we haven't imagined
> it. Is it still available, this human peace?
> (Morrison 2023, 56)

The "we" has become a universal "we", mankind, an interracial world of gender equality imagining universal peace (Wouldn't John Lennon have loved this?); Desdemona closes the story exclaiming "We will be judged by how well we love" (56) after a song which advocates communion amongst all human beings:

> It's a question
> Of working together
> On the task,
> I would be happy to take part.
> Whether we are from the same place or not.
> Whether we are from the same culture or not.
> Should we celebrate this moment?
> It would fill me with joy. (56)

When trying to define Morrison's *Desdemona* we can talk both of adaptation and appropriation. Julie Sanders considers adaptation as signalling a "relationship with an informing source text or original" which can be easily recognizable, whereas appropriation "frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural domain" (Sanders 2016, 26). According to this definition, it seems that adaptation suits Morrison's work more fittingly, though there certainly are 'journeys away' from Shakespeare which highlight questions of feminist and transnational subjectivities for blacks and a reversal of the manly ethos commonly attributed to Shakespeare's play, with the role of women coming to the fore. Adaptations such as this certainly involve an ideological critique of the source text, but in Carney's words "they are not unidirectional [and can] invite a return to and a re-evaluation of the source text" (Carney

2022, 3). As our title suggests, Morrison's *Desdemona* is, amongst all else, a useful tool precisely for a re-evaluation of Shakespeare's *Othello* since it widens possibilities of interpretation, and clarifications, of some of the darker aspects of the tragedy.

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