

Kay Stockholder

Form as Metaphor: *Othello* and Love-Death Romance

While Othello and Desdemona for the first time try to consummate their secret love as they lie upon their wedding sheets Iago shouts beneath Brabantio's window that thieves have broken into his house, that his daughter makes 'the beast with two backs', that 'an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe' (I. i. 88-9). At the same time, somewhere in the off-stage shadows, a messenger approaches the Senate with news of the Turkish threat to Cyprus. Those three separate events coalesce into a single stage image when messengers from the Duke arrive almost simultaneously with Brabantio's men outside of Othello's trysting place. Othello and Desdemona become the centre of a circle, the periphery of which is defined by violence, sexual violence in Iago and Roderigo's crude images, martial violence implied in the Cyprus wars, and the potential violence, closer to the centre of the circle, as the two groups meet. On this occasion Othello prevents the aura of violence from penetrating the inner sanctum of his love by asserting his martial control. He uses his military importance to the Venetian state to prove his worth as husband to Brabantio's daughter, to discharge the threat to his love posed by Iago's and Brabantio's vision of his animalistic sexuality, and to prevent the shedding of blood.

The violence that exists in verbal and stage images in the course of the play invades the lovers' hearts. The second time Othello and Desdemona try to consummate their union in the absence of their off-stage bedroom, the initial configuration repeats itself, but this time the violence is less clearly separated from the lovers. Iago both makes smutty innuendoes about Othello and Desdemona, and incites the armed struggle between Cassio and Roderigo which ends, this time, with Montano's blood spilled and with the clanging alarm that both rends the nocturnal peace and truncates Othello and Desdemona's nuptial rites. The stage image not only increases the violence around

the lover's invisible bedroom, but the language intertwines it with their love. Iago first fuses, nuptial love-making with violence when he says,

Friends all but now, even now
 In quarter, and in terms, like bride and groom
 Divesting them to bed, and then but now,
 As if some planet had unwitting men
 Swords out, and tilting one at other's breast,
 In opposition bloody.

(II. iii. 170-5)

However, Othello himself brings the imagery of violence into the center of his love when he says 'Come, Desdemona: 'tis the soldiers' life / To have their balmy slumbers wak'd with strife' (II. iii. 249-50). We catch the first glitter of the bright swords which, at Othello's bidding, were sheathed outside of their first trysting place.

On each of these occasions both verbal and stage images of violence are associated with and prevent the consummation of Othello's and Desdemona's love, whatever other narrative of their love might be constructed from the vagaries of time built into the play. Blood is spilled, but their wedding sheets are not stained with hymeneal blood. Dramatically, their love is consummated only when the surrounding violence has entered into and defined their feelings for one another. Verbal images have become visual when the wedding bed, its sheets at last stained with blood,¹ emerges from invisibility so that the couple can consummate their love only within their violent deaths.

This process by which verbal image slowly transforms into action thickens the sense of *Othello's* tragic inevitability. Further strengthened by verbal premonitions and ironic foreshadowing such as Othello's assurance to the Senate that his professional integrity is invulnerable to disturbance from his personal life, this sense of inevitability ensures that in retrospect the drama's end will appear to have been contained in the beginning. In retrospect events do not so much lead to one another, but rather unfold. It is as though a secret inscription of an inevitable fusion of the lovers' sexuality with violence causes rather than is the effect of the events that lead up to it. A similarly powerful sense of inevitability characterizes Shakespeare's earlier love-death romance, *Romeo and Juliet*, in which, as 'Fate,' it rises to the foreground. As a force that shapes the text and infuses the language of all the characters, Fate, brooding over the lovers, dramatically overshadows any psychological components one might detect in the process that brings their love to its fulfillment in the Capulet tomb. Here that sense of pre-ordainedness, unnamed and unaccounted for, invites one to look to the psychology of the lovers as expressed in their circumstances for the formal ways in which the beginning contains the end. It

invites one to see in *Othello* the psychological dynamics of love-death romance that are represented by Fate in *Romeo and Juliet*. Therefore, in this study I am going to concentrate on the love relationship in *Othello* and the context in which it occurs. I will leave Iago aside, for his strongly defined figure and his intense relation to Othello, along with Desdemona's relatively weak definition, obscures the psychological configuration that underlies and is expressed by the strong sense of futurity built into both the formal dramatic structure and the poetic texture.²

Othello's relation to women in general and Desdemona specifically should initially be seen in the context of his position in Venice. There he is defined by the combination of two factors—the Venetian admiration for and need of his military prowess, and Brabantio's outrage at Othello's marriage to his daughter. Brabantio defines Othello as asexual when he invites him into his home and allows him to spend time alone with Desdemona without even the possibility of a romantic liaison crossing his mind. He reveals his deep assumption that Othello is not a sexual person by his astonishment at their union, and by his certainty that Desdemona could not freely have chosen such a 'sooty bosom' as Othello's. The sympathy of the other senators toward Brabantio, qualified by their need of Othello's services, shows Brabantio's attitude to be typical rather than unique.³

Our view of the Venetians' qualified admiration of Othello is clearer than Othello's own, for he internalizes their view of him. He could not say that 'her father loved me,' and at the same time assume that his only option was to elope with Desdemona, without meaning by the 'me' loved by Desdemona's father the exclusively martial self that appears to Venetian eyes. His self-esteem, therefore, rests on seeing himself and being seen by others as an indispensable warrior hero. That view excludes and is threatened by a sexuality which, far from proving his manliness, makes him, in other's eyes, and consequently his own, degraded and bestial. The potential threat to his self-esteem posed by his sexuality appears in Iago's warning to Brabantio that Othello is making 'the beast with two backs' with Desdemona, while Othello relies on his military authority to protect his claim to the daughter he has stolen—'Put up your bright swords, / The dew will rust them.' His esteem as Venice's manly warrior, then, depends on his denial of his sexual identity. He relies on Venice's esteem of his martial powers to validate his claim to Desdemona, but that claim, being sexual, carries the potential to undermine the self-esteem and status on which it is based.

That Othello bases his self-esteem on a mirror image of the Venetian view of him that forces him to repudiate his sexuality appears when he

supports Desdemona's plea to be allowed to accompany him to Cyprus. He says,

I therefore beg it not
 To please the palate of my appetite,
 Nor to comply with heat, the young affects
 In me defunct, and proper satisfaction,
 But to be free and bounteous to her mind;
 And heaven defend your good souls that you think
 I will your serious and great business scant,
 When she is with me; . . . no, when light-wing'd toys,
 Of feather'd Cupid, seel with wanton dullness
 My speculative and active instruments,
 Than my disports corrupt and taint my business,
 Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
 And all indign and base adversities,
 Make head against my reputation!

(I. iii. 261-74)

He both denies his sexual being and betrays Desdemona by trivializing her, and his own love, as 'light-wing'd toys,' which demean his manly reputation.⁴

Seen in the context of his social definition, Othello's marriage to Desdemona functions as a means by which to avenge the sleights he suffered and to compensate for his self-abasement. At the same time it proves him better than the 'Venetian darlings' Desdemona rejected, and worthy, therefore, of a full place amongst them. In this light his marriage to Desdemona can be seen as partaking in the same set of unacknowledged feelings that determined his choice of Cassio rather than Iago as his lieutenant. For in aligning himself with Cassio, the elegant Florentine, Othello disassociated himself from the coarse Iago who, like Othello himself, is a stranger to the aristocratic Venetian world. In short, he plays the unconscious social-climber, for whom self-knowledge would destroy all self-esteem.

The complex feelings resulting from the way in which Othello's self-image mirrors the Venetian view of him also colour his feelings toward Desdemona who, as Iago tirelessly emphasizes, represents them. In the process of repudiating these feelings and motives that could tarnish the idealizing aura of romance, Othello unwittingly allows their trace to appear. After declaring to Iago his high, if barbarian, birth, he says,

For know, Iago,
 But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
 I would not my unhoused free condition
 Put into circumscription and confine
 For the seas' worth.

(I. ii. 24-8)

Othello asserts that only love could move him to renounce the 'unhoused free condition' that is synonymous with his social estrangement as though in defense against a silent and secret accusation that he loves in order to renounce it, and thereby gain entry into the Venetian world which has kept him a stranger.

The feelings represented by these images are distant from and inimical to Othello's consciousness. Consciously he separates Desdemona from her Venetian identity and finds in her compassion an anodyne for the pain consequent upon his having radically separated his public face from his inner life. When the First Senator asks,

Did you by indirect and forced courses
Subdue and poison this young maid's affection?
Or came it by request, and such fair question,
As soul to soul affordeth.

(I. iii. 111-14)

Othello's response reveals the inner life of an estranged man. He has told Brabantio the story of the 'battles, sieges, fortunes' that he had passed, but to Desdemona he tells of 'some distressed stroke / That my youth suffer'd.' The piteous tears she sheds for the vulnerable and lonely person beneath his warrior image water the parched desert of his inwardness. For them he loves her, and opens his heart to her only to close it again around her. But the enemy is now within the gates. Desdemona becomes for Othello his own inward self, the 'fountain from / which [his] current runs / Or else dries up' (IV. ii. 60-10). Having 'garnered up [his] heart' in her, his self-image now becomes dependent on her in two ways. First, having identified himself with her, he will incline to overlay her idealized image with his image of himself, and so see her as corrupt beneath her womanly beauty as he is beneath his manly honour.⁵ Second, since Desdemona remains a Venetian she may look at him with Venetian eyes and so confirm him in rather than free him from his secret self-abasement. His love for her is thus interfused with the complex mixture of buried anger and vengefulness one feels toward those whose esteem is both necessary and humiliating. Furthermore, since Othello identifies Desdemona with himself, her sexuality must, like his own, be associated with a foul bestiality that belies overt virtue.

This tense and tenuous psychological state of fused love and hatred determines the plot configuration in which Desdemona's and Othello's passion forms the center of the circle from which radiates a periphery of bestial images, shouts in the darkness and violent swords. These murky depths which generate and nourish Othello's love are seen to ripple the smooth surface of his consciousness when Othello, greeting Desdemona in Cyprus, says,

If it were now to die,
 'T were now to be most happy, for I fear
 My soul hath her content so absolute,
 That not another comfort, like to this
 Succeeds in unknown fate.

(II. i. 189-93)

Othello's fear of the unknown fate that awaits them is the psychological form of what has already shaped the verbal and visual images that constitute the text. On that level it is his intuition of the emotional dynamic already at work which will shape his future. In marrying Desdemona, Othello attempted to integrate into his image of himself as warrior, one of himself as lover, but the combination was doomed to destroy both. First, having identified himself with an idealized image of Desdemona in order to render himself sexually worthy, his underlying self-hatred must colour his perception of her, rendering him ready to see her as sexually corrupt as he feels himself to be. In the process his previously secret self-hatred, in becoming externalized into an image of Desdemona's foul appetites, also makes him feel that his inner corruption is exposed. Therefore, his name 'that was as fresh / As Dian's visage' becomes as 'begrime'd and black / As [his] own face' (III. iii. 392-4).⁶

Second, that same image expresses his secret knowledge that his esteem as warrior depended on being seen as asexual, or as chaste as Diana. It reveals his intuition of the integral connection between his love life and his professional life. In his view Desdemona's supposed infidelity effects his reputation as warrior because his sexuality reveals his secret identification with the barbarians from whom it is his profession to defend Venice. Since he used his sexuality in claiming Desdemona metaphorically to storm the gates of the Venetian elite that were closed against him, he is aligned with the Turks who literally do so. His ambition for status that intertwined with his love tarnishes the ambition that was rendered worthy by his role as Venice's heroic warrior. Both his secret identification with Venice's enemies and his identification of Desdemona with the Venetians they attack become explicit when in the act of suicide he defines himself as the loyal Venetian as well as the 'turban'd Turk' who 'Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state' (V. ii. 353). The image of Cassio's kisses on Desdemona's lips functions as an externalized image of all the emotional dynamic implicit in his marriage. It reveals him as the barbarian suggested by Iago's image of Desdemona caught in 'the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor,' and simultaneously reveals and renders absurd his ambition for the social status, the desire for which he had repudiated. The image therefore leads directly to Othello's farewell to his occupation:

I had been happy if the general camp,
 Pioneers, and all, had tasted her sweet body,
 So I had nothing known: O now for ever
 Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content:
 Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
 That makes ambition virtue: O farewell,
 Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
 The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife;
 The royal banner, and all quality,
 Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
 And, O ye mortal engines, whose wide throats
 The immortal Jove's great clamour counterfeit,
 Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone!

(III. iii. 351-63)

Othello's farewell to his profession not only flows from the underlying dynamic of his love. It also is the means by which he permits himself to release the passions that will permit him to consummate his love. For Othello's profession was to restrain barbarian passions, both his own, and those of the Turks. Since for him restraint of others and self-restraint are identical, his farewell to his occupation also expresses his final abandonment of self-restraint. That link was intimated by Othello's complacent self-confidence in his ability to remain undistracted by Desdemona's presence in Cyprus. The mixture of sexual and aggressive passion came closer to the surface when Othello, roused from his marriage bed by Iago's success in causing Cassio to quarrel with Roderigo, says, 'My blood begins my safer guides to rule, / And passion having my best judgement collied / Assays to lead the way' (II. iii. 196-98). In formally abandoning the profession that was defined by his self-restraint he implicitly espouses the underlying association between love and rage that structured the text, and frees himself to consummate the perverse sexuality which binds love to hate and rage. The visual image of Othello and Desdemona lying dead on their wedding sheets expresses the only way in which both the 'circumcised dog' and Venice's warrior can both consummate their passion.⁷

Desdemona's contribution to their love's fulfillment in death is, as I said earlier, obscured by the symbolism of cosmic Good in a Manichean universe that attaches to her figure. That idealization, in part, shows Othello vainly attempting to dissipate his sexual and social unease about himself by idealizing her as he does himself. By so doing he initiates a vicious circle that can end only in death, for the more radiant she appears, the darker he seems by contrast in his own eyes. But other figures contribute to the idealizing imagery, suggesting Shakespeare's involvement in the idealization, the destructiveness of which he also dramatized.⁸ That ambivalence appears also in the discrepancy between what Desdemona says and what she does. She

separates herself from Othello's idealization of his perfect joy at their reunion by repudiating his wish that the moment might be their last when she says, 'The Heavens forbid / But that our love and comforts should increase, / Even as our days do grow' (II, i. 193-5). However, the pattern of her reactions to Othello reveals, through the obscuring radiance, all that is required for a naturalistic portrait of a woman who unconsciously colludes with the eroticized rage that kills her.

In the play's past, Desdemona has repudiated her many suitors, suggesting either a disinclination for marriage, or a dislike of sophisticated Venetians, but also dramatically suggesting a disposition to hold herself in readiness for something other than ordinary love. Othello's tales of the 'blows [his] youth suffered', saved for her ears only, along with his more public tales of romantic adventure, together constitute all the witchcraft that is necessary to move her compassion for his secret vulnerability. Her intense pity moves her sexuality so that she, seeing Othello's 'visage in his mind' rather than his black face, can leap the social barriers represented by that face. She chooses in Othello the strange, wild, and potentially violent rather than her suitors' urban tameness.

As Othello is aware of being moved by her compassion, but unaware of the significance her Venetian identity has for him, so too is Desdemona aware of loving his exotic strangeness, but unaware of its implied violence.⁹ Her speech to the Senate hints at a secret desire to identify herself with Othello's martial image:

That I did love the Moor, to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued
Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord:
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate:
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support,
By his dear absence.

(I. iii. 248-59)

As Othello identifies his inward soul, where he has 'garnered up his heart,' with her gentle purity, Desdemona identifies herself with his martial prowess when she describes her own 'downright violence' that did 'trumpet to the world' as she scorns being left a 'moth of peace.' She clothes herself in Othello's martial pride, becoming the 'fair warrior' who shares in his heroic violence. When she says that if she remains in Venice, 'the rites for why I love him are bereft me,' 'rites' carries a

double meaning, referring both to the rites of war for which she loves him, and to the rites of a marriage she now seeks. That the two meanings merge in a single word associates them with each other, suggesting that unconsciously she links her sexual desires to the strife that characterizes the world from which she has chosen her husband.

Desdemona's unconscious identification with and desire for Othello's potential violence leads her to behave in ways that, had they been calculated, could not better have inflamed his anger. When she undertakes Cassio's cause Desdemona consciously behaves in conformity to her stated desire to associate herself with Othello's soldierly life. But she also undermines his authority, ironically giving force to Iago's claim that 'our general's wife is now our general' (II. iii. 305-6). She clearly likes defining herself within Othello's professional life, and takes pleasure in the public power she derives from their intimacy. Despite Othello's certainty that his public life is invulnerable to private troubles, Desdemona sets out to make a skillet of Othello's helm when she promises Cassio that 'My Lord shall never rest, / I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience; / His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift' (III. iii. 22-4).

But something more is implied by Desdemona's consistently assertive behaviour in situations in which she might have accomplished more by a politic passivity, and her passivity when assertive anger might have allayed Othello's suspicions. She persists in speaking of Cassio after Othello has said 'Not now sweet Desdemona, some other time' (III. iii. 56), as if she is not content until she excites his anger, even though Othello has as much as granted her request in twice repeating 'I will deny thee nothing!' (III. iii. 77, 84). When he barely conceals his seething rage in referring to his aching head, she offers, with her handkerchief, the pity for his pain which had won his love. But having succeeded in arousing his ire, she allows herself to be intimidated and confused, losing the previous boldness with which she might have admitted her loss of the handkerchief and thus prevented him from exaggerating its importance. Nor does Desdemona press him to explain himself when, publicly humiliated before Lodovico and the others who have come from Venice, she retreats in fear and confusion. When in private he calls her a 'whore,' and 'public commoner,' and accuses her of doing things too foul to name, rather than demanding to know of what she is accused she falls into an entranced passivity. As though enthralled by the rage she has succeeded in kindling, after Othello has thrown her coins in leaving, she says in response to Emilia's 'how do you?', 'Faith, half asleep' (IV. ii. 98-9).

Desdemona behaves as though hypnotized; when Emilia asks 'what is the matter,' she responds 'With who?' 'Why, with my lord, madam'

says Emelia. 'Who is thy lord?' (IV. ii. 100-3) she asks. Out of the bemused or entranced state induced in her by the threat of Othello's violence, as though from the depth of her unconscious and without an explanation in ordinary reality, emerges her direction to Emelia, 'Prithee, to-night / Lay on my bed our wedding sheets' (IV. ii. 10). It is clear that the thought that she might die has already crossed her mind, for she says to Iago that 'Unkindness may do much, / And his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love' (IV. ii. 161-3). She remains bemused as she awaits her furious husband, and dreamily wonders whether anyone would 'do such a thing for all the world.' Emelia, like Juliet's nurse, resists Desdemona's drift toward romantic death with unromantic vigor in saying, 'The world's a huge thing, it is a great price for a small vice' (IV. iii. 67-9). As though in ambivalent response to Emelia's vitality, Desdemona, readying herself to die in her nuptial consummation, murmurs 'This Lodovico is a proper man He speaks well' (IV. iii. 35). Though she cannot espouse Emelia's unromantic vision, her mind wanders to the very kind of man that Iago maliciously predicted, and that Othello most feared it would. But they were wrong, for Desdemona's impulse toward life that earlier made her object to Othello's desire for an instant death, succumbs to the greater seduction of offering herself as willing sacrifice to the violent rage she had attracted to herself. Desdemona's sexual swoon into the consummation of her marriage in death reveals her in collusion with Othello, even as she experiences herself as forgiving victim. She speaks an ironic truth when, in a semi-miraculous revival, she answers Emelia's question, 'Who has done this deed?' by saying, 'Nobody, I myself' (V. ii. 124-5).

Despite the idealizing imagery which surrounds Desdemona, and despite Othello's structural position as an Everyman in an internalized morality play caught between diabolic and heavenly forces represented by Iago and Desdemona, when one considers them naturalistically what emerges is the portrait of a couple whose unknown desires generate and permeate the romantic love that leads to their violent deaths. When Othello says, 'I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this, / Killing myself to die upon a kiss' (V. ii. 358-9), he makes explicit the sexual violence that was the shaping force of the text. Shakespeare's commitment to naturalistic character portrayal, together with the luxuriant language at his disposal, betrayed him into a text that renders a plausible psychological source of love-death romance. The formal devices that generate tragic inevitability thus become a complex metaphor for secret desires so antithetical to ordinary pleasures that they can be satisfied only in deep and devious ways. The progression from *Romeo and Juliet*, the touchstone of love-death romance in

our culture, to *Othello* throws into relief the later play's psychological penetration of the romantic passion that under the guise of Fate drew Romeo and Juliet into the tomb.

NOTES

1. To put it that way immediately makes one wonder why it is Othello's blood rather than Desdemona's that stains their sheets, and recalls Othello's satisfaction in deciding to smother her, rather than shed her blood. One might see that in context with the psychological identification to be discussed below, or one might see it in a wider context of the kind of gender confusion suggested by Hamlet when he calls Claudius his mother, or by King Lear when he compares women to centaurs. A tangential connection to *Macbeth*, is suggested by Jennifer La Belle in "A strange Infirmary, 'Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980) 381-86, who relates the menstrual blood that Lady Macbeth asked to be stopped to the blood that flows throughout that play.
2. Many people have in different ways suggested that Iago should be seen, at least in part, as an aspect of Othello, and that as a consequence that the central drama can be comprehended without reference to Iago. Leslie Fiedler in *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1967) talked of Othello and Iago as the same man, both of them strangers (192-3). W.H. Auden in 'The Joker in the Pack,' *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Random House, 1948), 246-72, puts it differently in saying that Iago brings to Othello's consciousness all that he has guessed is there in the process of drawing close to him. J.I.M. Stewart makes a similar point in *Character and Motive in Shakespeare* (London: Longmans, 1949) where he argues that 'Iago's villainy draws its potency from Othello's own mind' (102). He also sees the play as an exploration of the 'inner processes of romantic idealism' (104). The most recent I know of the many interpretations of the tragedy as deriving primarily from Othello's character is that of Carol McGinnis Kay, "Othello's Need for Mirrors," *Shakespeare Quarterly* (Autumn 1983), 261-69, who argues that Othello's undeveloped ego accounts for his need to stage himself in other's eyes makes him an unwise judge and incapable of self-awareness.
3. Auden also emphasizes Othello's alienation from Venetian society and notes Othello's fear that the respect he enjoys is for his occupation only (264-66). To omit Iago from consideration of the dynamics between Othello and Desdemona is to look for the causes of the tragedy in the nature of their love itself. Since their love is a special case of being in love, such a study has implications for the dynamics of romantic love. For a theoretical discussion of the psychology of love-death romance that touches on the interpretation of *Othello* offered here, see Robert Bak, 'Being in Love and Object Loss,' *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 54 (1973) 1-7. Seeking to explain the frequency of the link between love and death, and basing his argument on Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, Bak argues that the experience of falling in love represses the aggression that accompanied a prior loss of a love object, and that a succeeding loss can turn that aggression inward with suicide its result, and that suicide, like romantic passion, is an experience of the self being overwhelmed by an internalized other. Other work relevant to an analysis of being in love comes from object-relations theory. See Otto Kernberg, 'Love, the Couple and the Group,' *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, XLIX (1980) 109-127.
4. Edward A. Snow in 'Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*,' *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980), 384-412, connects the issue of sexuality to society in a different and more general way. He says that Othello is so ready to believe in Desdemona's guilt because it expresses his sense of the sinfulness of sexuality. He sees the play in that way illustrating the necessary consequence of patriarchal society, and Othello's rage as the voice of the Father rather than that of a barbarian.
5. Arthur Kirsch in *Shakespeare and the Experience of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981) notes Desdemona's maternally unconditional love and Othello's child-like vulnerability, which he sees as the psychological basis for the spiritual elevation of their love. He also emphasizes the importance to the outcome of Othello's belief that he is unlovable.

6. Coppelia Kahn in *Man's Estate* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981) makes an interesting general argument for the social dimensions of the fear and shame of cuckoldry which in her view becomes 'psychosocial castration' (132). Madelon Gohlke in 'I wooed thee with my sword,' *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, eds., Carol R. Lenz, Gayle Green and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), 1-16, argues that Shakespeare's protagonists equate being dishonoured with being vulnerable and therefore castrated. I think these views pertinent to many of Shakespeare's plays, and to *Othello*, but they do not engage the specific ways in which being cuckolded and dishonoured are synonymous for Othello.
7. Marjorie Garber holds a related view in *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1981). She argues that Othello is unable to accept his own sexual nature, and that his fall is a consequence of 'his denial of the primacy of love, both emotionally and sexually' (136). She links the strawberry spotted handkerchief to sheets stained with hymeneal blood, and sees in the wedding sheets for which Desdemona asks, Othello's confusion of 'sexual and martial impulses.'
8. The question of whether Shakespeare intended Desdemona to represent an ideal, or whether he wrote a play showing the dangers of turning a person into an ideal has been the focus of much debate. F.P. Rossiter in *Angel with Horns and Other Shakespeare Lectures* ed., Graham Storey (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961) raises but does not answer the question (205). Carol Thomas Neely in "Women and Men in *Othello*" *Shakespeare Studies* 10 (1977), 133-58, argues that Othello shifts from idealizing to debasing women, each the opposite side of the coin to the other (137), and Joan M. Byles in "The Basic Pattern of Psychological Conflict in Shakespeare's Tragic Drama," *Hartford Studies in Literature* 11 (1979), 58-72, says that Othello loses his own ideal rather than a real woman (62). Kirsch sees Desdemona as the 'incarnate ideal of martial love' who loves like a mother, unconditionally and is also freely sexual (25). Othello, convinced of his own unloveableness because of his age and colour, sees her love as perverse (32), and is stretched between his self-hate and his idealization of her. Kahn sees Emilia as expressing the play's point, that women are neither saints nor whores, and that male polarized phantasies arise from their fear of cuckoldry (140). Fiecler similarly argues that Desdemona is the lie men tell themselves about women, but sees Shakespeare caught in rather than free from that lie.
9. Other critics have argued that Desdemona participates in bringing the tragedy upon herself, though I think in ways that go beyond the evidence offered by the play and overlook the importance of her character to the relationship. Richard Dickes in "Desdemona: An Innocent Victim?" *American Imago*, 27 (1970), 279-97, says that Desdemona gets what she wants in her own death (279), and sees her 'hypnotic state' as an expression of her oedipal guilt for her choice of Othello for which she seeks her own death as punishment (290). Stephen Reid in "Desdemona's Guilt," *American Imago*, 27 (1970), 245-62, makes a related observation. Desdemona, he says, feels guilt for her desire to repay the infidelity she felt from her father and therefore calls violence to herself (261). Alan B. Rothenberg in "Infantile Fantasies in Shakespearean Metaphor: Photophobia, Love of Darkness and Black Complexions," *Psychoanalytic Review*, 64 (1977), 173-302, offers another version of their collusion. The fear of blindness, he says, expresses castration anxiety that can be handled by turning voyeurism into exhibitionism which is then denied. 'In place of loss of sight he may accept the loss of being seen' (178). Othello and Iago, he says, both wish to see, but not to be seen (191), and Desdemona wants to be seen, but does not wish to see. She therefore loves a black man whose face she replaces with her idea of his mind (189). Rothenberg's argument often seems overly strained but is in part persuasive.