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Othello and the Master-Servant Dialectic

We cannot be all masters, nor all masters
Cannot be truly follow'd. (*Othello* 1.1.43–4)¹

THOMAS RYMER FAMOUSLY concludes that *Othello* is “a Bloody Farce,” a “tragedy of the Handkerchief,” because he cannot make sense of the master/servant logic in the play.² First, he believes that “neither History nor Heraldry” would allow Othello—a “Black-amoor”—to become a master. Second, an audience can recognize nothing grand in the characters: “noble Desdemona” falls in love with a black soldier and behaves like a “Country Chamber-maid.” “We see nothing done by [Othello] or related concerning him that comports with the condition of a General—or, indeed, of a Man.”³ Third, Iago is “the most intolerable” of servants because, unlike “other Souldiers of our acquaintance,” he is a “dissembling, false, insinuating rascal instead of an open-hearted, frank, plain-dealing Souldier.”⁴ As a result, Rymer calls it “an affront” to present these masters and this servant to an audience.

This essay argues that the master-servant dialectic is central to the tragedy of *Othello*, and highlights five modes of master-servant relationship featured in the play, namely, might and the Hegelian master-servant dialectic, language and Lacanian master-slave discourse, prerogative and

¹ All references to *Othello* are to the Arden Shakespeare, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann (Surrey: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997).

² Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on William Shakespeare's Othello*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (New York: Routledge, 2003) 46.

³ *A Short View of Tragedy* 45, 46.

⁴ *A Short View of Tragedy* 46.

the premodern notion of mastery and enslavement, love and the female master-slave dialectic, and scepticism and the servant's role reversal. The audience is invited to notice the gap between Othello's military prowess and his enslaved mind, Desdemona's self-determining capacity and her servile attachment to Othello, Iago's humble status and his linguistic mastery, and finally, Emilia's habitual compliance with her "wayward husband" and the eventual defiance of her "lord." In short, *Othello* offers a complex picture of the master-servant relationship. While Edward Pechter accurately notes that "[t]here are masters and servants, because gradation inheres inevitably in any social order,"⁵ Shakespeare tells us that race, language, education, and gender differences also impact on the micropolitical ties between the master and servant.⁶ In the end, General Othello and Desdemona are not "absolute" masters; and Iago and Emilia are not merely servants. Shakespeare highlights the failure of love in *Othello* by giving us three deaths on stage.

I

The backstory of *Othello* features classic Hegelian master-slave dialectic.⁷ Othello was once a slave, but Shakespeare makes Othello rise to become a master—for a black soldier can emerge victorious after winning a series of life-and-death struggles. Othello's "unvarnished tale" not only chronicles his struggles for survival but also his military effort to win social recognition. Ever since his "boyish days," he has experienced "disastrous chances" and "moving accidents by flood and field" (1.3.135–36). He had been "taken by the insolent foe," "sold to slavery" (1.3.138–39), and encountered the

⁵ Edward Pechter, *Othello and the Interpretive Traditions* (Iowa: U of Iowa Press, 1999) 63.

⁶ Michael Neill points out that "for seventeenth-century audiences [*Othello*] might have seemed to be a play more centrally concerned with the corruption of master-servant relationships than with issues of race as we have come to understand that slippery term." (See Michael Neill, "Othello and Race," *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Othello*, ed. Peter Erickson and Maurice Hunt [New York: MLA, 2005] 46). This essay suggests that race is an important factor that can subvert the formal master-servant relationship.

⁷ In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the slave can get rid of its servile status through labour. Meanwhile, the birth of the master involves several stages: i.e., the realization of abstract self-consciousness, the trial by death, and finally, the attainment of being-in-and-for-itself. Simply put, the subject first sees himself and the other as "ordinary," abstract "objects submerged in the immediacy of life." (See Paul Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1999] 89.) Through action, the self and the other can "raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth." Eventually, Hegel believes that "it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won" (G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* [Oxford, Oxford UP, 1977] §187; hereafter PS). A man finally becomes a free, independent creature existing-in-and-for-himself because he can overpower others and attain a sense of self-certainty.

“cannibals” and the “Anthropophagi” (1.3.144–45). However, Othello has fashioned himself to become a powerful “warlike Moor,” and he “commands like a full soldier” (2.1.27,35–36). As a result, the “Valiant Othello” is not afraid to seek a pure being-in-and-for-himself. He defies social taboos and marries a white woman, wedding her without the consent of her parents.

Shakespeare is not a racist—hence he affirms that a black soldier can be a “worthy governor” (2.1.30); however, Shakespeare also implies that the “color prejudice” in Elizabethan times can easily undo a black General’s masterdom.⁸ In fact, I fully agree with Michael Neill that *Othello* “does not oppose racism, but (much more disturbingly) illuminates the process by which such visceral superstitions were implanted in the very body of the culture.”⁹ *Othello* tells us that, although no colonization took place during the sixteenth century, the Elizabethan discourse always defined itself against black people.¹⁰ If Iago calls Othello an “old black ram,” the reverend Brabantio simply sees Othello as a “thing” with a “sooty bosom” (1.2.70–71). Mixed marriages were not desirable because they could topple the ascribed, racial iconography. Labelled a “Barbary horse” (1.1.110), the acculturated, upwardly mobile Othello not only fails to eradicate his racial subjugation, but also acknowledges the “validity” of this racist discourse due to his prolonged immersion in white culture. He calls the court officials “noble and approved good masters” (1.3.78) while he thinks a “turban’d Turk” can be “malignant,” and an Indian can be “base” (5.2.351,345).

⁸ “Color prejudice” is a term used by G.K. Hunter. He also says: “We might say that Iago is the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul.” (See G.K. Hunter, *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* [Liverpool: Liverpool U Press, 1978] 46.)

⁹ See Michael Neill, “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989): 412.

¹⁰ Ania Loomba tells us how “blackness” is problematized by the cultural discourses of Elizabethan times before colonization was practiced: according to two different assessments about “Renaissance ideologies of colour: one, that black skin was thought of as a ‘natural infection’ and was therefore indelible,” the “blackness of the Parent’s sperm or seed” would “overpower whiteness if the two were coupled, and two, that blackness was seen as derived from geographical location, and as mutable. But crucially proponents of both views concurred that *blackness* . . . could contaminate whiteness.” In fact, Loomba says “[w]ell before the actual enslavement and colonial plunder of Africans began, an obsession with colour and nakedness was firmly in place,” “[b]lackness was staple (although not static) ingredient in images of wildness, of evil, of class difference.” (See Ania Loomba, “‘Delicious Traffick’: Racial and Religious Difference on Early Modern Stages,” *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells [Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2000] 211, 207.)

If Hegel believes that power, self-consciousness and reciprocal recognition can make a man a master, *Othello* foregrounds how the possession of (financial, cultural, military) power, individuality, and governmental recognition do not suffice to initiate a subject into freedom. In fact, Shakespeare constantly draws our attention to his black hero's embarrassing situation—the discrepancy between Othello's legal rights and his dependency. Act 1, Scene 3 is an *appointment/trial* scene, and it serves to give us a double exposure of Othello's potency and powerlessness. This scene paradoxically highlights, on the one hand, people's ready acknowledgement of Othello's legal and military status; and on the other, people's fear of miscegenation and an explicit refusal to practice integration. Othello, as a national asset, is valued during emergencies: "we must straight employ you" (1.3.49). However, the master is actually on trial because of his "crime"—for Brabantio claims that the marriage is "against all rules of nature" (1.3.102). Since Brabantio believes that "bond-slaves" should not be "our statesmen," he says "all things of sense" also tell him that his daughter should not favour "such a thing as [Othello]" to the "wealthy, curled darlings of our nation" (1.2.99,64,71,68). Othello has to risk dismissal from his position or even his life in order to defend a very personal affair, his marital *jouissance* ("the office I do hold of you / Not only take away, but let your sentence / Even fall upon my life" 1.3.119–21). In answer to all the charges laid against him, Othello's masterly spirit is so constantly undermined by his dependent (servile) consciousness that he always has to seek the court's support. Othello can defend his case eloquently, but he ends up requesting white voices such as Desdemona's testimony and the Duke's verdict to authenticate his marriage. At the end of this scene, the court's decision leads neither to genuine reconciliation between Brabantio and Othello, nor to any cultural acceptance of blackness in the Elizabethan society. The Duke's words, "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.291), simply heightens the ideology of race that uses whiteness to imply virtue. Eventually, Othello's marriage is juxtaposed with the discourse of theft. Brabantio calls Othello a "foul thief" (1.2.62); the Duke thinks Othello has done "mischief" (1.3.205) to white society. Thus he advises Brabantio to at least keep up a dignified appearance—for "the robbed that smiles steals something from the *thief*" (1.3.209, emphasis added).

II

Shakespeare conveys the *differential* speaking position between the black and white subjects through the level of plot—Iago is the masterful speaker who opens the play. Through language, Iago can turn himself to become a (Lacanian) discursive master¹¹ and redefine the black General as he sees fit, for he possesses what Lynne Magnusson calls the “symbolic capital” that allows him to “manipulate the linguistic market.”¹² With his symbolic power, Iago does not need the other’s affirmation and his utterances already carry what Pierre Bourdieu calls “signs of authority, intended to be believed.”¹³ When the play begins, Iago’s spiteful utterances demonstrate two kinds of hatred against Othello: positional and personal. Shakespeare echoes Hegel’s idea that the servant will always slight his master due to his viewing position, for “no man is a hero to his valet.”¹⁴ Owing to the servant’s special knowledge of the master, Iago speaks only to foreground Othello as a man who loves his “pride and purposes,” and the “epithets of war” (1.1.11,13). Meanwhile, Iago has a strong, personal reason to spite Othello, for he believes his master has neglected him.

¹¹ Unlike the Hegelian master, the Lacanian master governs reality with a set of totalizing discourse. The master invents a new master signifier—the famous “quilting point”—and everything becomes “readable.” In the words of Slavoj Žižek, “the Master adds no new positive content—he merely adds a *signifier*—which all of a sudden turns disorder into order.” “[A]lthough there is nothing new at the level of positive content, ‘nothing is quite the same’ after he pronounces his Word.” (Slavoj Žižek, “Four Discourses, Four Subjects,” *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek [Durham: Duke U Press, 1998] 78). For example, Freud invents words such as “superego” and “id,” and he launches a new era in the study of the human mind; Marx uses the word “Class” to read human history, and modern history is no longer the same. What makes the master and his word so special is that the master signifier (S₁) is essentially a “nonsensical signifier” (a signifier without a signified; a ‘signifier with no rhyme or reason’; c.p. the word “id”). (See Bruce Fink, “The Master Signifier and the Four Discourses,” *Key Concepts in Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus [New York: Other Press, 1998] 31.) However, with the power of words, the master can effectively establish a “universal discourse,” dominate (enslave) all ordinary signifiers (S₂), and make people understand reality as he wants them to.

¹² See Lynne Magnusson, “‘Voice Potential’: Language and Symbolic Capital in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 50 (1997): 92. Magnusson rightly notes that how a person’s “speech is received will depend less on what he says than on the social site from which it is uttered.” (91)

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 66.

¹⁴ Hegel, PS, §665. Hegel believes that “no man is a hero to his valet” not because the hero is not a hero, but because “the valet—is a valet, whose dealings are with the man.” He uses his personal knowledge to judge the hero, and sees the hero “as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes.” He chooses to see the hero as a mere man, and thus “play the part of the *moral* valet towards” the hero and deprecate the hero (PS, §665).

Iago becomes a Lacanian master because he not only makes things with words, but also uses one or two signifiers to invent a unified discourse, and reconstruct the entire world. Iago's powerful words compensate for his powerless position, for he quickly resorts to a unified, *fantasmal* discourse to initiate the game of defamation. In Act 1, Iago actively forces his fantasy/story on the audience/Roderigo, thereby revealing how white people can enjoy the advantage of "definition," while black people only have the power of dissent. Iago neatly ascribes his "unhappy consciousness" (the hallmark of a servant)¹⁵ to three reasons: the new system ("Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation"), Cassio's imbecility ("Mere prattle without practice / Is all his soldiership") and Othello's injustice ("his eyes had seen the proof" of Iago's performance at Rhodes and Cyprus, and yet... etc. See 1.1.25–37). In this light, Iago's malignity cannot be, as Coleridge says, "motiveless."¹⁶ His "I know my price" speech conveys Iago's faith in his unified subjectivity, his *imaginary* self-worth, and emphasizes the view that Othello has ousted him from "his place." Hinting at the logic of an eye for an eye (you have ruined my career and I am going to ruin yours), Iago declares his future position as a master of revenge—"I follow [Othello] to serve my turn upon him" (1.1.41).

Iago plays the game of detraction by using *one* signifier to read Othello: he is but a "Moor" (1.1.39). All of a sudden, everything owned by the black master becomes a case of "transgressive" enjoyment. It is in this context that he tells Roderigo and Brabantio of Othello's "conspiracy": a Moor now wants to marry a white woman, hoping to give the Senator "cousers for cousins, and jennets for Germans" (1.1.112). Iago hyperbolizes the cultural stereotype to portray Othello as a pest to white society.¹⁷ Exploiting the racial stereotype, he readily sees Othello as a lascivious character, an "old black ram" "tupping" a "white ewe" (1.1.87–88). As a result, Iago suggests that Brabantio's domestic "crisis" be elevated to become a "national intolerance" of the Moor's conduct—Brabantio must "awake the snorting

¹⁵ Hegel identifies three characteristics of the servant, that is, stoicism, scepticism, and the unhappy consciousness. See PS §197.

¹⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Notes on the Tragedies," *Coleridge's Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable, 1930) 49.

¹⁷ Thus Karen Newman says "Iago enjoys a privileged relation with the audience. He possesses what can be termed the discourse of knowledge in *Othello* and annexes not only the other characters, but the resisting spectator as well, into his world and its perspective... Iago is the cultural hyperbole." See "'And Wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (London: Methuen, 1987) 151.

citizens with the bell” (1.1.89). Brabantio duly agrees that Othello the Moor is a menace to the white family and the white nation, hence he says “my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong” (1.2.96–7).

We cannot but note the differences between Othello and Iago’s discursive agency. Othello is a passive storyteller, whereas Iago is always a cogent usurper.¹⁸ Othello needs the invitation of Brabantio to “[question him] the story of [his] life” (1.3.129). He also depends on the opportunity of “a pliant hour” in order to deliver, “by parcels,” his “pilgrimage” to Desdemona. Othello’s “pitiful” life is characterized by many discontinuous narratives for it is full of adventures, “disastrous chances,” “battles, sieges, fortunes,” “hair-breadth” escapes, and “distressful stroke / That [his] youth suffered” (1.3.131–37, 158–59). Eventually, he is a divided subject who loves Desdemona, but relies on her encouragement to woo her. He is sure of his noble conduct, but he needs the Duke’s decision to accredit his behaviour. On the other hand, Iago’s white enunciating position and absolute voice save him from these problems. His powerful words give him the means to ensure that his target audience will all “be led by th’ nose / As asses are” (1.3.400–01). Using a simple signifier (or what Žižek calls the “famous quilting point”),¹⁹ Iago can invent a coherent discourse to persuade people to follow his thinking. One example is that when Roderigo wants to drown himself because of a broken heart, Iago uses the signifier—“Money”—to redirect Roderigo’s attention and explain the situation to him. The phrase “Put money in thy purse” (see 1.3. 340–73) is uttered many times and in various forms as if it were *the* solution to Roderigo’s problem—even though all his suggestions do *not* require the use of money at all: that is, Roderigo should “follow... the wars”; Desdemona won’t “continue her love to the Moor”; “[t]hese Moors are changeable in their wills,” Roderigo can “enjoy her” (1.3.333–60).²⁰ However, Roderigo is convinced by Iago’s advice and says “I am changed. I’ll sell all my land” (1.3.380).

¹⁸ In the words of Alexandre Leupin, “the master is always a usurper precisely because he feigns that he is able to derive his position from himself, erasing the fact that he occupies it only because the designation allows him to do so. The source of his power is a signifying, linguistic structure, which he conveniently forgets.” See Alexandre Leupin, *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science, Religion* (New York: Other Press, 2004) 72.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Four Discourses, Four Subjects,” 77.

²⁰ The power of Iago’s words and the illogical argument can only authenticate Bruce Fink’s words: the master is heeded—“not because we will all be better off that way or for some other such rationale—but because he... says so.” The master is “unconcerned with knowledge: as long as everything works, as long as his... power is maintained or grows, all is well.” (Bruce Fink, “The Master Signifier and Four Discourses,” 31).

The dialogue between Iago and Desdemona in Act 2 is not, as Barker and Rymer see it, “a bout of artificially comic distraction” or “a long rabble of Jack-pudding farce.”²¹ The ninety-line scene actually allows us to witness how Iago’s master-discourse can single-voicedly redefine the notion of “femininity” for two women, building on the existing (male) master-(female) servant hierarchy. His *interpellative* power helps explain why, later, he can boldly say, “I know our country disposition well” (3.3.204). Iago eloquently “quilts” the entire field of “womanly behaviour” based on the gender stereotype and, particularly, on his “omnipotence of thought.” In the words of Leupin, this omnipotence of thought makes the master think that “thinking is then the totality of reality.”²² In *Othello*, Iago has a very cynical view of women: they are vain, loquacious, deceitful, and lustful creatures (see 2.1.109–12). At Desdemona’s request, Iago further categorizes women in terms of their utility (fair and wise women are useful), their complementarity (a witty black woman will “find a white” man), their biological function (produce heirs), and their amorality (all women love “foul pranks”). Interestingly, Iago’s “Ideal Woman” is an oxymoronic queen-slave. She has much moral and cultural capital: she is fair, wise (“in wisdom”), rich (“never lacked gold”), well-bred (“never proud”), chaste (“see suitors following, and not look behind”). However, like a (sex) slave, she has to practice self-abnegation: she is “never loud”; she who “could think” must “ne’er disclose her mind”; and she has to heed men’s sexual requests (“Now I may”). If angered, she must not seek vengeance (“bade... her displeasure fly”). Her ultimate task is to be a docile, productive servant in the domestic context: to “suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (see 2.1.148–60). Though Iago may have merely repeated cultural myths about women and added nothing at the level of insight, his totalizing view helps produce a coherent (imaginary) discourse for people to evaluate/distrust women. As the master alone can produce a systematic theory, though Desdemona calls Iago a “slanderer,” or considers his conclusion “lame and impotent,” (2.1.113, 161) she keeps seeking his opinion.

After the Turkish fleet is destroyed by the storm, Shakespeare intends that, in Cyprus, the life-and-death struggle should take a symbolic form. By positing something out of “nothing,” by hailing others into his “false

²¹ Granville Barker considers this scene functions as a comic relief to show us “Desdemona’s silent anxiety” and Thomas Rymer thinks these lines are fit only for “the Country Kitchen-maid with her Sweetheart,” quoted here from *Othello*, ed. M.R. Ridley (London: Methuen, 1976) 54.

²² See Alexandre Leupin, *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science* 71.

consciousness,” Iago can create a new linguistic empire and reign supreme. As Iago notes that “Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons” (3.3.329), *Othello* proves to us that words are indeed deadlier than the sword. In the play, almost all the important characters at one point or another ask Iago for advice; Iago is thus free to engage himself in clear fabrications to re-present a reality that suits his interests. What follows is the classic word-trap: Iago uses his characteristic theft discourse to “enmesh them all” (2.3.357). He tells Cassio to steal a moment’s pleasure and “let a soldier drink” (2.3.69). He arranges Roderigo to provoke Cassio and “steal away” Cassio’s brains (2.3.282–83). Iago “wooed [Emilia] to steal” the handkerchief (3.3.297). He leads Othello to believe that Desdemona must have had her “stol’n hours of lust” with Cassio (3.3.341). In less than one hundred lines, Othello falls for Iago’s opinion. Having first defined that *all* Venetian women are full of “foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural” (3.3.237), Iago tells Othello that Desdemona will not fail to match “her country forms” (3.3.241) because “knowing what I am, I know what she shall be” (4.1.73). The circularity of the master-discourse is beyond challenge for the master offers a systematic ordering of knowledge and “forecloses the truth that all knowledge is by structure and definition incomplete.”²³ Eventually, Iago’s discursive authority cannot but impress Othello, thus he exclaims, “This fellow’s of exceeding honesty, / And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, / Of human dealings” (3.3.262–64).

III

The handkerchief plays an important role in determining the fate of Desdemona, as well as in highlighting the difference between the premodern notion of mastery and Hegel’s power-based class system, or Lacan’s discursively constructed master-slave hierarchy. In *Othello*, the handkerchief has a dual function because Shakespeare has given it two contradictory attributes. On the one hand, it has the status of a pre-modern *mythic* object that can empower a woman to enslave a man. In the eyes of Othello, the handkerchief has great value because of its spellbinding prerogative, and masterdom comes solely with the possession of this Thing. On the other hand, it is also a modern, *symbolic* object, an item represented by Iago to be the legal, rational, “ocular proof” to mark Othello’s right to punish Desdemona, now that he has the evidence of being in a “cuckolded” position. To Iago, the

²³ Alexandre Leupin, *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science, Religion* 71. He also notes that the “source” of the master’s “power is a signifying, linguistic structure.” In fact, if one can alter the ordering of the signs, one can altar the social structure itself (72).

handkerchief itself is of no importance whatsoever, for its sole use is to let him exercise the skilful negotiation between fact and interpretation, sight and insight. In the radical split between the world of wordless Thing and thingless words, Othello's choice reveals to us the problem of miseducation.

First of all, like a sacred object in a primitive society, the handkerchief has the status of a mythic "Thing," and whoever possesses it infers the right of government. We must note that the handkerchief is a family heirloom given by an Egyptian to Othello's mother, believed to have with it a charismatic authority to launch a legitimate master-slave relationship. Shakespeare wants the audience to see that there is indeed "magic in the web of" the handkerchief (3.4.71), thus Othello's mother uses the handkerchief as a charm to lure Othello's father. Othello notes that "while she kept it / 'T would make her amiable, and subdue my father / Entirely to her love" (3.4.60–62). The mythic dimension of the handkerchief lies in its *enslaving* function: "if [Othello's mother] lost it, . . . [his] father's eye / Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies" (3.4.62–65). The handkerchief is all about servitude or death: "To lose't, or give't away, were such perdition / As nothing else could match" (3.4.69–70). Eventually, Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief signifies for Othello the end of primitive (magic) worldview and charismatic authority, although the irony is that, Shakespeare directs his readers to see the so-called disenchanting, modern (formal) reason, or the "ocular proof" as likewise a myth.

If Othello once told Desdemona "I will deny thee nothing" (3.3.83), his change in Act 3 marks a desire to find proof of Desdemona's adultery and "hunt after new fancies" guided by Iago's totalizing discourse. While the handkerchief-in-itself marks an empty space (to use the words of Marcelle Marini, the thing-in-itself is "outside signifier," "outside signified"),²⁴ to Iago, it is a hole that allows his words to reconstruct Othello's domestic order. The handkerchief is re-presented to Othello and it functions as a lure/screen to shield/reveal the adulterous connection between Cassio and Desdemona. We must note that the handkerchief is, most of the time, an absent object; however, Shakespeare tells us that words can "protract" reality. Iago spares no effort in giving a vivid account of the void (i.e., the cause of the handkerchief's loss, how "Cassio wipe his beard with" it, and "he hath given it his whore" [3.3.442, 4.1.174]). When the handkerchief is finally seen, it quickly seals the fate of Cassio and Desdemona. As Iago keeps sending his image of Othello and Desdemona back to him ("Nay,

²⁴ Marcelle Marini, *Jacques Lacan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U Press, 1992) 172.

you must forget that,” “that’s not your way,” “she’s the worse for all this” [4.1.177, 183, 188]), Othello, to prove himself a “manly” subject in the eyes of the Other, talks to himself by addressing himself to Iago. Othello “will chop [Desdemona] into messes” (4.1.197).

Shakespeare sees to it that Iago’s success has much to do with Othello’s weakness, his racial insecurity. Iago’s words imply that Othello may be in power, but there is surplus knowledge that he does not know. Iago further refuses to play the role of a docile slave: “[he is] not bound to that all slaves are free to,” hence he refuses to “utter [his] thoughts” (3.3.138–39). Having inverted the master-slave relation, Iago begins to work on Othello’s cultural knowledge of women and his latent inferiority complex. First of all, upon Iago’s slightest hint, Othello has no problem concurring with the mythic view that women can be unfaithful to their husbands. Furthermore, Othello has an immediate conviction that Desdemona can betray him “for [he is] black,” “for [he is] declin’d / Into the vale of years” (see 3.3.267–72). This fear not only mirrors an old, black man’s anxiety when he marries a young woman, but also shows a deep-rooted identification with the cultural discourse in Elizabethan times (i.e., white women always prefer the “wealthy, curled darlings” of the white empire). As Iago’s words mingle the general with the particular, racial complex with cultural myths, facts with lies (black/white, male/female, loyalty/infidelity, Desdemona’s lying about the loss of the handkerchief/a gift to Cassio), it is not easy for the involved party to make an impartial decision. Othello is led to feel the unhappy consciousness, though he denies it (“Not a jot”) when he hears Iago say, “I see this hath a little dashed your spirits” (3.3.218). In Act 4, Othello is finally portrayed to have become the “echo” of Iago. His physical and verbal commands quickly deteriorate when Iago is not around. He strikes Desdemona and welcomes Lodovico using nonsensical words: “You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus. Goats and monkeys!” (4.1.263). The master is paradoxically Iago’s slave when he adopts Iago’s method in killing Desdemona: “Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed— / even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.204–05).

In Act 5, Othello’s sword can only wound—but not kill—Iago. I believe this event mirrors Shakespeare’s view on the battle between the word and the sword, and is not meant to be a return to the primitive mindset, or the re-enchantment process (i.e., Iago cannot die for he is the “devil”). Shakespeare tells us that Iago remains a larger-than-life character, for his totalizing language will not tolerate any contradiction. To the end, Iago maintains his discursive supremacy by saying, “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know, / From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.300–01). However, we are led to understand that Iago is always a slave in the Hegelian sense, for the bondsman’s servile consciousness will never

have the courage to do deeds that involve “the staking of his own life.”²⁵ As Iago fears death and direct confrontation at all costs, we can understand why Iago hates Cassio but he also says he “fear[s] Cassio with [his] night-cap” (2.1.305). If Othello has no hesitation to kill himself, Iago would rather live on to face “cunning cruelty” (5.2.331). Shakespeare implies that Iago’s silence will not lead him to safety. As he becomes a prisoner, Gratiano says “[t]orments will ope [his] lips” (5.2.302).

The handkerchief episode is important in pointing out that *Othello* is more than what Rymer calls a domestic “tragedy of the Handkerchief,” and that Othello is *not* a jealous husband.²⁶ In fact, the fall of Othello is due not so much to unreason (jealousy), but to his blind adherence to (and the non-reflexive understanding of) the white Law. It makes him become a master in the Venetian society, but it also unmakes him in due course of time. Shakespeare takes pains to characterize Othello as an exemplary product of the westernized education—i.e., Othello is “not easily jealous” (5.2.343); he is a disenchanted subject who is unafraid of magic, monsters, “cannibals,” and “Anthropophagi.” What’s more, he is a stout Law-lover who devotes his life to the preservation of the empire and the functioning of the monogamous family. In this regard, his flaws can be said to have originated from this unquestioning worship of (white) justice and Law. For example, Othello has no problem in laying his life before the court in Act 1, or accepting state violence done to himself (“my life not only take away”) just to preserve the spirit of the Duke’s Law. Shakespeare also reveals to us that Othello is strict about the separation between the private and the public domain, formal justice from personal feelings—to the point of absurdity. He will not neglect any “great business” because of “Cupid”; if so, he will “[l]et housewives make a skillet of [his] helm” (1.3.273).²⁷ Othello’s obsession with justice is described again in Act 2, for he proclaims with a firm voice that the instigator of the “foul rout” is “monstrous,” even if “he had twinned with me, both at a birth, / Shall lose me” (2.3.208–09). With a mind so bent to defend the notion of “order,” it is no wonder that upon hearing of Desdemona’s alleged adulterous affairs in Act 3, Othello simply cries “black vengeance” and wants to “tear [Desdemona] to pieces” (3.3.450,434).

²⁵ Hegel, PS §187.

²⁶ This view is famously expressed by Thomas Rymer. *Othello* is “a lesson to Husbands, that before their Jealousie be Tragical the proofs may be Mathematical” (*A Short View of Tragedy* 45).

²⁷ Ben Saunders rightly says “Othello’s denial of excessive desire comes to seem excessive in itself.” See Ben Saunders, “Iago’s Clyster: Purgation, Analogy, and the Civilizing Process,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55 (2004): 164.

Shakespeare implies that the problems of Othello are actually linked to the convoluted rite of passage—the (mis)education—experienced by the black subject. For all Othello’s passionate defence of “Law,” the Venetian society has taught him to love justice *without knowing what is just*. As seen in the play, any slightest deviation can easily bring lawsuits (or even imprisonment) to a black General. Othello is forced to be a conformist in the habit of “bending” to the patriarchal custom, with little leeway to question the white epistemological empire. The effect of this (mis)education is that a black man can be conditioned to become a “Christian soldier,” only to have a very shallow understanding of love or forgiveness—and a high regard for “violence.” Othello’s (mis)education makes him conclude that no brother or spouse should be forgiven if s/he transgresses the existing social order. And upon listening to Iago’s “wise” words, Othello says he will simply kill Cassio and Desdemona because “*the justice of it pleases*” (4.1.206, emphasis added).

Furthermore, bred by the state to be a “war machine,” Othello is encouraged to develop a strong love of action and a vague idea of substantive or procedural justice. For example, in Act 1, Othello never reflects on the notion of the good, or the “serious and great business” of the Venetian court. Although once a slave, he is not concerned with the imperialistic enterprise in Cyprus. Having been a soldier rather than a courtier, Othello is, unlike the senators, ill-adapted to the mechanics of procedural justice. For example, when Brabantio learns of Othello’s “foul proceeding” (1.3.66), biased as he is, he makes an effort to personally examine Desdemona’s empty chamber, then goes to Othello’s house to confront him, hoping to take Othello “[t]o prison; till fit time / Of law, and course of direct session, / Call [him] to answer” (1.2.85–87). Upon hearing Brabantio’s claim, the Duke wants to have a “test” before he lays the sentence (“To vouch this is no proof, / Without more wider and more overt test” 1.3.107–08). However, Othello demonstrates his ignorance of procedural justice in Act 3. Although Othello says, “I will see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove” (3.3.193), he never bothers to prove or test the case by catching the couple in an adulterous act, or summoning the guilty party to answer his charge, or transferring them to the Venetian court to be tried. Instead, he builds his case on insufficient grounds, and does not discern whether a piece of evidence is verifiable or admissible, and which fact is legally material and which is immaterial (i.e. Iago’s insinuations, Cassio’s dream, Bianca’s having the handkerchief, and Desdemona’s excessive concern with Cassio). His lack of legal knowledge (its spirit, formal procedures, conviction) is perfectly shown in this statement: “First to be hanged, and then to confess” (4.1.38–39). With no genuine

understanding of legal procedures, it is no wonder that Othello's judgment quickly degenerates into an empty but violent vindication of the Law.

Ironically, Shakespeare intends that the (mis)education that unmakes Othello is the thing that restores him: Othello becomes a master again precisely because of his blind faith in the empire and the Law. After learning of the "discontented" papers found in Roderigo's pocket (5.2.315), and Emilia's portrayal of her mistress's conduct, Othello comes to prefer these fragmentary voices to Iago's totalizing handkerchief narrative. He admits his failure (or perhaps the failure of his white education), for with reasons "perplexed in the extreme," he comments that he has behaved inexplicably, like "the base Indian, threw a pearl away, / Richer than all his tribe" (5.2.344–46). Othello reiterates the white/black hierarchy only to subvert the moral paradigm. He says a "turban'd Turk" might have "traduc'd the state"; however, he—an *ultra-legal* Moor—will ultimately defend the state again by imposing punishment on the transgressor ("I... smote him thus" See 5.2.341–54). In the final moment, Othello becomes a self-mastering hero again for he can launch a life-and-death struggle against himself to right the wrong, and defend the Law of the empire.

IV

Why must Desdemona die? *Othello* is, of course, an important "warning to all good Wives that they look well to their Linnen."²⁸ In addition to that, the master-servant dialectic in her relationships with her father, her husband, Emilia and her mother's maid Barbary also provides a key to the answer of the question. First, Shakespeare characterizes Desdemona to be a self-determining woman who is "not deficient, blind, or lame of sense" (1.3.64); however, Desdemona is regarded by the paternal tradition to be a piece of servile "property" from the start. Brabantio cloisters her, and (mis)recognizes the real Desdemona for her masquerade. As a result, he thinks she is "[a] maiden never bold" (1.3.95). Later he does discover that Desdemona has her own mind about securing her marital well-being, for she is actually "half the wooer" (1.3.176). In opposition to the practices of the traditional family, where parents chose their children's marriage partners in accordance with their wishes, Desdemona represents the rise of a new ethical woman for she chooses her own mate. In her self-defence, Desdemona acknowledges the importance of the natural family, but she immediately challenges the paternal notion of duty for she must follow the

²⁸ Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* 45.

feminine choice, a particularistic “duty” of choosing *love*, of “preferring [her husband] before her father” (1.3.187).

By adhering to her feminine ethics, Desdemona is empowered by love to refute all paternal advice in the private or public domain. She leaves her father’s house, and refuses the Duke’s suggestion to live with her father. Instead, the self-positing Desdemona declares that her “scorn of fortunes / May trumpet to the world” as she renounces “[h]er father, and her country, and all her friends” (1.3.250–51, 4.2.128). We might say that Desdemona is not at all a loser in the process—for she has gained a more prominent identity. First of all, her noble status is preserved. As noted by M.R. Ridley, even Desdemona’s detractor cannot say Desdemona “has lowered herself socially by her marriage.”²⁹ Secondly, her sovereignty is no longer limited to the active governance of household affairs, for she expresses a strong desire to rule Othello (“I’ll watch him tame” [3.3.23]).³⁰

One scholar suggests that Desdemona’s love for Othello owes much to her “greedy” ears and mouth, her “aural/oral libidinal economy.”³¹ However, I would like to suggest that Shakespeare actually wills this love affair to be founded on mutual recognition between two like-minded masters. Desdemona’s independent mind is confined by the paternal society; hence it is easy for her to sympathize with Othello’s previously oppressed state. Desdemona loves “[Othello] for the dangers [he] had passed”; and this, in turn, appeals to her fighting spirit when she has to confront her father and the Duke (1.3.168). Meanwhile, Othello and Desdemona both place duties over private pleasures. Desdemona will not forsake her duties (“house affairs”) for her love of Othello (just as Othello argues that Desdemona will not hinder his business in Cyprus). In terms of career ideals, both are interested in the business of action and war. Othello has great delights with the “big wars, / That makes ambition virtue” (3.3.352–53). The moment Desdemona knows of the imminent danger in Cyprus, she argues that the court should “let [her] go with [Othello]” for this reason: “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” (1.3.256–58). In short, when the story begins, Shakespeare gives us two masters who are equally firm in their being-in-and-for-them-

²⁹ M.R. Ridley, “Introduction,” *Othello*, ed. M.R. Ridley (London: Methuen, 1976) liv.

³⁰ Perhaps it is not without reason for Iago to say that “Our general’s wife is now the general” (2.3.305–06).

³¹ The idea is that Desdemona “‘devours’ [Othello’s] discourses with a ‘greedy ear’, . . . Desdemona is punished for she is a desiring subject and women are not supposed to be one.” See Karen Newman, “And Wash the Ethiop White” 150.

selves-and-for-the-state, while sharing an interest in adventure, and the imperialistic business of war in particular. It is a companionate marriage in every sense, for the couple is not only united by their feelings for one another, but also by their love of the Venetian state. Based on this union of mind and hearts, Desdemona has an intuitive understanding of Othello's (probably white) recognition of himself; thus she says, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.253). Othello also happily calls Desdemona his "fair warrior" (2.1.180).

The conflict between Desdemona and Othello can only highlight the difference between male and female ways. In Act 3, Shakespeare gives us two sacred vows of a completely different nature. The patriarch always responds to universal, male concepts such as justice and honour. However, Desdemona is attuned to the personal elements, the (female) preference for love and friendship. Right before Cassio makes his appeal, Emilia reports that Desdemona already "speaks for [Cassio] stoutly" (3.1.45). Upon hearing Cassio's grievances, Desdemona happily agrees to become a "solicitor" for Cassio (3.3.27); hence she makes a vow: "If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it / To the last article" (3.3.21–22). Her *lawyer* image (in contrast to Othello's warrior image) is further reinforced when she says, "thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away" (3.3.27–28). It shows that while the feminine mind does acknowledge the universal right and wrong, or the legitimacy of public law over private relationships, she is also interested in using her personal power to reconcile the two separate domains. Thus she tells Othello, "If I have any grace or power to move you, / [Cassio's] present reconciliation take" (3.3.46–47). The argument is that since Cassio "errs in ignorance and not in cunning" (3.3.49), Desdemona suggests that they can still have Cassio as a friend for dinner ("[I]s not almost a fault / T' incur a private check?" [3.3.66–67]). According to this feminine logic, personal love and public justice can eventually join hands when Desdemona uses the wife-and-lawyer imagery to *humanize* the Law in front of her husband: "when I have a suit / Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed" (3.3.80–81). Desdemona expects the husband to comply with her requests at all times, especially in cases "full of poise and difficult weight" (3.3.82). At this stage, Othello, trapped between his role as a husband and a governor, gives her a perfunctory promise: "let him come when he will, / I will deny thee nothing" (3.3.75–76). Three hundred lines later, Othello also makes a "sacred vow" because he wants to terminate wrong in his household. He uses cosmic imagery (the ever-recurring "Pontic Sea," the hardened "marble heaven") to *dehumanize* himself, to align inhuman justice with the universal (retributive) Law to practice "wide revenge" (see 3.3.456–66). And the more Iago talks of the conflation of (feminine) private feelings with (male) legality ("Yet

be content,” “your mind perhaps may change,” “let [Desdemona] live” (3.3.453,455, 477), the angrier Othello becomes. Eventually, all personal sentiments have to give way when Othello declares, “my bloody thoughts with violent pace / Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love. . . / In the due reverence of a sacred vow, / I here engage my words” to kill Desdemona (3.3.460–65).

Shakespeare foregrounds the key difference between the male and female master-slave dialectic, for the latter is related not so much to power or language, but to the issue of love. Unloved by the husband, a woman’s status can quickly change from that of a powerful mistress to an abject, quasi-servant. The downfall of Desdemona in Act 3 can only mirror the mutability of female status in relation to the love bond, as Othello turns from a “most dear husband” (2.1.289) to become a hard-hearted judge. Desdemona first sees herself as the equal of Othello, hence she thinks she can handle Othello easily: “His bed shall seem a school” (3.3.24). However, without the protective charm of the handkerchief, Desdemona feels that she has fast become an “unhandsome warrior” (3.4.152). Her story features how vulnerable a woman is in the private domain, for she becomes even more unprotected when the Venetian court is replaced by domestic inquisition, open debates by arbitrary accusations (the handkerchief), and her husband being her judge rather than her ally. However, she will still be an active woman to “go seek [Othello]” (3.4.165).

In Act 4, Shakespeare foregrounds how love leads a strong woman to enslave herself, and thereby demonstrates the clash between the male and female notion of love. In *Othello*, the feminine notion of love denotes unquestioning loyalty, forgiveness and inseparability; hence, women will sacrifice themselves to standards that they have themselves set up. For example, Barbary spends her life moaning for her lost love. Desdemona *has to* follow Othello; she *has to* “preserve” her body “for [her] lord / From any hated foul unlawful touch” (4.2.85–86). She cannot commit adultery “for all the world” (4.3.63). Meanwhile, Bianca loves Cassio and “haunts [him] in every place” (4.1.132), and Emilia faithfully dies for Desdemona. In short, females of all classes in *Othello* have faith in *inalienable* love. On the other hand, the male logic implies *alienable* relationships, for love does not guarantee inalienable ties in the paternal world. Othello loves Desdemona, but he will leave her on their wedding day if necessary (it is Desdemona who suggests that she follow him around). Othello is fond of Cassio, but he also fires him. Cassio tells Bianca, “Not that I love you not” (3.4.196), but he also stays away from her for a week and considers himself only “a customer” (4.1.120). Venice has nothing to say against Montano, but it has no hesitation in replacing him with two other governors in Cyprus within a

short period of time. In fact, the male world decrees that there is no sacred cause to defend, and the logic of exchange governs all human interests. As a result, Roderigo reckons that his jewels “would half have corrupted a votarist” and can make Desdemona return him “expectations, and comforts of sudden respect” (4.2.189–93). Summoning the (male) law of exchange, Iago tells Othello that “a housewife... by selling her desires / Buys herself bread and clothes” (4.1.95–96).

Interestingly, Emilia’s statement confirms Iago’s words—only to challenge his logic. She will not commit adultery for the sake of (paternal) self-interest (“I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring; nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats...” [4.3.71–73]), but she will “venture purgatory” for the feminine notion of love. She will do it for the love of her husband, thereby denoting the morally transgressive nature of inalienable love (“who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?” [See 4.3.74–75.]) In the case of Othello, his paternal idea of Law makes him reject a woman’s faith in (inalienable) relationships. Thus he cannot believe that Desdemona is not interested in the paradigm of exchange, and thus he cannot forgive Desdemona. Instead, he publicly tells the Venetian lords that Desdemona “can turn, and turn, and yet go on, / And turn again” (4.1.253–54). He assumes that Desdemona’s pleas are just for her self-interest, hence he tells her “there’s money for your pains” (4.2.95).

In *Othello*, three women suffer from the servile unhappy consciousnesses, and they all die singing the servant’s willow song. Interestingly, Shakespeare makes Desdemona turn *black* and become a slave in a symbolic manner—for she has become the “double” of Barbary, her mother’s maid. Barbary “was in love, and he she loved proved mad, / And did forsake her” (4.3.25–26). Hence the maid always sings a “willow song” to signify her jilted, living dead state of being. Act 4, Scene 2 tells us that Desdemona at first wants to have nothing to do with a madman (she has “no lord”); however, love makes her ask Emilia to “lay on [her] bed [the] wedding sheets” (4.2.107), showing that she does value the memory of her wedding. Desdemona denotes the mystical attraction that Othello holds for her; she will not give Othello up: “unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love” (4.2.162–63). In spite of her good sense, she behaves like “poor Barbary” and ends up singing the morbid “willow song” before her death (4.3.31). As her dead body is laid on the wedding sheets, it can only mirror a love-struck heroine’s fate: her nuptial enjoyment not only makes her a happy mistress, but also makes her a slave of love and consigns her to a death sentence—for it features a mystical/mortal ecstasy, a strangling union that precludes reason and Law.

Peter Stallybrass suggests that there are two divergent Desdemonas.³² The truth is that Desdemona has always been a fighter, and her feminine ethics have given—and clipped—her wings at the same time. Desdemona is like a faithful subject who knows that her husband is *not lovable*, and yet she has made a *choice* to see that; no matter what he does to her, the man will always be an attractive lover: “Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve” (4.3.51). In that light, Desdemona has become a beautiful soul for she can only forgive and not hate anyone. She is lenient even to her slanderer: “If any such there be, heaven pardon him!” (4.2.137). Her near-death “mercy” speech denotes a desperate life-and-death love contest with her cruel master, arguing that she only loves Othello—her “sins” are “loves [she] bear[s] to [him],” she “never lov’d Cassio” (5.2.40, 59). Rational as ever, she points out the flaws of Othello’s verdict owing to his incorrect interpretation of evidence (handkerchief) and the problem of witness. For one moment she feels afraid (“I feel I fear”) and slavishly begs Othello to let her live (“Kill me to-morrow, let me live to-night” [5.2.38,79]). However, in the final moment, she chooses to assert her sovereignty like a queen, and have her final words (just like Othello before his death). In answer to Emilia’s question, “O, who hath done / this deed?” Desdemona re-presents her situation and answers with an autonomous voice: “Nobody, I myself” (5.2.122, in an echo with Barbary’s song: “let nobody blame him”). In the final master-slave conversion, it is not Othello or his paternal (il)logic that victimizes her, for Desdemona suggests that she chooses to renounce her life because of love. What’s more, Desdemona desires that her love must not end with her death, hence she actively instructs Emilia to continue showing her love to her husband, to “commend” her to her “*kind* lord” (5.2.123, emphasis added).

V

Emilia’s impulsive outburst not only overpowers all the male voices, but also rebels against the patriarchal idea of feminine docility—as she deliberately ignores Othello’s authority (“Peace, you were best”) and her husband’s command (“I charge you, get you home” [5.2.157,191]).³³ Right from the beginning, Shakespeare has characterized Emilia to be a

³² The first Desdemona is an “active agent” in the first half of the play, but she becomes a passive body “interrogated and deciphered” as the object of men’s surveillance. See Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories, the Body Enclosed,” *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago and London: Chicago U Press, 1986) 137.

³³ Mark T. Burnett has a high regard for Emilia’s resistant speech: “A key idea is the woman servant’s ability to speak what polite society deems to be unspeakable.” See Mark T. Burnett,

dual-voiced, sceptical woman who has a double allegiance to her master at home and her mistress at work. She can serve her masters well, but she can also criticize them, while resigning herself to the hard life of a faithful servant and wife. Emilia has a very low opinion of men in general: “[Men] are all but stomachs, and we all but food, / They eat us hungrily... They belch us” (3.4.105–07). She considers her husband “wayward” (3.3.296), and bluntly tells her husband, “You shall not write my praise.” (2.1.116). She disagrees with Desdemona’s marital choice, and tells her that: “Would you had never seen [Othello]” (4.3.16). However, in the final analysis, she listens to Iago’s words and gives him Desdemona’s handkerchief, and she follows Desdemona’s order to lay the wedding sheets on the bed. Her double allegiance to Iago and Desdemona soon ends due to the triumph of the *feminine law of the heart*—a law which incorporates impersonal reason and personal love.³⁴ Emilia reverses her role of a docile servant for she resists injustice on the ground of love. With an inalienable love for her “sweet mistress” (5.2.120), Emilia speaks up when she hears Othello call Desdemona a “whore,” and she says, “true hearts cannot bear it” (4.2.119). She is very angry that “some coggling, cozening slave” is trying to “get some office” by slandering the angelic Desdemona (4.2.134). Upon finding out about her mistress’s death, she urges Iago to explain everything for “[her] heart is full” (5.2.171). When she is about to die, she cannot bear being separated from her mistress and asks others to “lay [her] by [her] mistress’s side” (5.2.235). In the face of gross injustice, Emilia will not “obey” Iago, and she “will speak as liberal as the north” wind (5.2.218). The price she pays for her discursive freedom is, unfortunately, death. The end of the play marks her following the example of Barbary and Desdemona as she died singing “willow, willow, willow.” Emilia is likewise killed by a villain who has mortally hurt and forsaken her.

In short, the master-servant dialectic is crucial to the study of *Othello*. If love is supposed to be “patient and kind,” “never jealous,” and “never rude,”³⁵ Iago’s language, Othello’s racial complex and (mis)education,

Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience (Basingstoke and New York: St Martins Press, 1997) 141.

³⁴ Hegel suggests that if “the law is *immediately* present in the being-for-*self* of consciousness, it is called the *law of the heart*” (PS §367, emphasis original). In the *Phenomenology*, the characteristics of this law can be summarized in this way: first, it is intuitive as “[t]he law... is immediately self-consciousness’s own law”; second, it upholds a transcendental “heart” as the foundation of this law. The “*End* which self-consciousness proceeds to realize” is the heart, which, within it, has a law (PS §368). Third, this unifying heart-law is eventually the opposite of the law of the world. The heart-ruled subject will defy the world for its tyrannical restriction of individuality.

³⁵ See 1 Corinthians, 13: 4. All biblical quotations are taken from the Jerusalem Bible.

Desdemona's female ways all help alienate the couple, thereby quickening the masters' reversal of fortune. The play opens with a marriage and ends with a union of *thanatos*. As Othello dies kissing Desdemona, Shakespeare leads us to see that love truly does not come to an end—although “heavenly” sorrow always “strikes” where there is love (5.2.21–22).