DESDEMONA'S DISPOSITION

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My title finds its source in Othello's petition to the Duke of Venice as he accepts his commission for Cyprus: "I crave fit disposition for my wife," that is, "Due reference of place" for her in his projected absence. From an immediate concern with Desdemona's proper (and improper) physical placements throughout Othello, I shall turn, second, to the relationship of those placements to the fitness of her disposition in another sense, that of her temperament or character. Then, third, I shall consider the ways in which both figure in her final disposition, her unfit death at Othello's hand. Throughout, I shall be occupied with how Desdemona can be and has been read, referring both to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century domestic conduct books that serve as primary vehicles for interpretation and for judgment of her, and to the subsequent critical responses that have maintained their own continuity with a patriarchal philosophy that would have her complicit in her own tragedy. For all this, my overriding thesis is that while hers may be a tragedy of Othello, it is of course not the tragedy, and the latter is that with which I shall conclude: the tragedy of men-in-marriage that Othello personates and what it tells us of the incapacities of patriarchalism.

I

The implication of Othello's petition to the Duke of Venice is that Desdemona's disposition at the time of his request is unfit, or that it would be unfit in Othello's absence during the siege of Cyprus, or that it is unfit for any prolonged period—in any case, that it requires amendment. Our apprehension of its inadequacy is compounded by his overelaborated request for "Due reference of place, and exhibition" and "such accommodation and besort / As levels with her breeding" (1.3.236–39). We have been given, with the odd insistence of des-
ignatory repetition, concrete information about Desdemona's location during her nuptial sojourn: Othello has been discovered at and she has been summoned from a building called the Sagittar in the first quarto, the Sagitary in the Folio. And so I shall begin with the problematic Sagittar/y and the import of this seemingly gratuitous act of naming.³

Iago's introduction of the name is resonant with signification:

Though I do hate him, as I do hell's pains,
Yet, for necessity of present life,
I must show out a flag, and sign of love,
Which is indeed but sign. That you shall surely find him,
Lead to the [Sagittar/y] the raised search,
And there will I be with him.

(1.1.154–59)

On the literal level, this passage emphasizes the duplicity of Othello's ensign (or sign bearer). But his iteration of "flag," "sign," and "sign," a noun sequence culminating in "Sagittar/y" and punctuated by "there will I be with him,"⁴ serves in addition the subliminal function of summoning up for the listener or reader a mental image of the sign with which an inn or tavern would have been identified—and in this provides some substantiating hint of what editors have generally concluded to be the public nature of the place. Editorial glosses frequently attempt an analogy to the "Centaur" of The Comedy of Errors,⁵ although a more common related name for an inn in early modern England was undoubtedly the "Archer." This much is hinted in John Taylor's comic tour of the taverns of London in 1636, purportedly a search to record in their names the twelve signs of the zodiac and so to "imitate" the sun in its journey. He notes, "For Sagittarius, I was forced to make use of the sign of the Archer, near Finsbury-fields, or Grub-street end" (sig. A4).⁶ Shakespeare may perhaps have reversed the Water Poet's linguistic process, latinizing a somewhat more common English name for his Venetian locale. As further suggested by Taylor, though, the identifying sign for an inn named the "Sagittar/y" would in any case have been itself a representation of a "celestial sign," the technical term in astrology for any one of the twelve elements of the zodiac. The "zodiacal man" of the English almanac—according to Ruth Samson Luborsky the most familiar secular image in Tudor England—fixed in universal currency the figurative nature of the Sagittarius as a centaur with drawn bow (see illustration).

The sign under which Othello and Desdemona institute their marriage is thus that of a monstrous being, half-man, half horse. With "an old black ram / Is
The zodiacal man, from Richard Allestree’s *Prognostication for this Present Year of Grace 1623*. Reproduced by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

tupping your white ewe” (1.1.88–89), Iago has already initiated a network of allusions to the transformation of men into beasts (1.1.116; 2.3.256, 284, 297), horses (1.1.111–13), baboons (1.3.316), asses (1.3.400; 2.1.304), goats (3.3.184, 409; 4.1.259), toads (3.3.274), dogs (3.3.368; 5.1.62; 5.2.362), monkeys (3.3.409; 4.1.259), and wolves (3.3.410) that intersects with the zoologically transgressive nature of the centaur.7 The Sagittar/y also participates in yet another ominous complex of images, the most notable elements of which are the figuration of Iago’s scheme against Othello as a “monstrous birth” (1.3.402), his warning that jeal-

ousy is a “green-ey’d monster” (3.3.170), and Othello’s eventual self-recognition that “A horned man’s a monster, and a beast” (4.1.62).

Because illustrations of the “zodiacal man” typically depicted Sagittarius in profile, with the spines of both man and horse outlined, the creature is also in and of itself a “beast with two backs,” the vivid image of bestial sexuality with which Iago torments Brabantio. The association of centaurs with sexual assault was located in the legends of their attempted rape of the Lapith women, to which Shakespeare refers in *Titus Andronicus* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and of Nessus’s rape of Deianira, to which he alludes in *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. To Brabantio’s mind, Othello is just such a lustful kidnapper of his daughter; of Othello he might say, as does Parolles of Dumaine, “For rapes and ravishments he parallels Nessus” (4.3.251).

Finally, Sagittarius is particularized among centaurs by its weapon; its legendary association with military prowess (especially in the Trojan War) is corroborated in *Troilus and Cressida*, where “The dreadful Sagittary / Appalls our numbers” (5.5.14–15). It thus, of course, bears an affinity to the Othello who is described as “Horribly stuff’d with epithets of war,” “warlike,” and “a full soldier” (1.1.14; 2.1.27; 2.1.36) and who comes to Brabantio’s house to tell the story of his life, “the battles, sieges, fortunes, / That I have pass’d”:

It was my hint to speak, such was the process:  
And of the Cannibals, that each other eat;  
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
Do grow beneath their shoulders: this to hear  
Would Desdemona seriously incline;  
But still the house-affairs would draw her thence,  
And ever as she could with haste dispatch,  
She’d come again, and with a greedy ear  
Devour up my discourse; which I observing,  
Took once a pliant hour, and found good means  
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart,  
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,  
Whereof by parcel she had something heard,  
But not intentively: I did consent,  

...  
She lov’d me for the dangers I had pass’d,  
And I lov’d her that she did pity them.  

(1.3.142–68)

This passage, so often isolated for critical discussion that its central importance to the play cannot be doubted, establishes a telling dichotomy between,
on the one hand, Othello’s stories of sieges and monsters and, on the other, Desdemona’s duties in managing Brabantio’s wifeless household. The house exerts a socializing force that “ever” and “again” she attempts to frustrate, but her responsibilities repeatedly “draw her” away from Othello and, it is re-emphasized, prevent her from hearing anything other than interrupted “parcels.” Finally, an “intentive dilation” initiates a movement from Brabantio’s sphere to Othello’s that culminates in her elopement. As she has hastened “house-affairs” for tales of monstrous men and battles, so she flees her father’s house for a building named after a creature that is monstrously half man, half horse, and poised for attack.8

Until Desdemona confirms her willing translation to the Sagittary, Brabantio has entertained no doubts that his house represents the disposition that is fit for her. Iago and Roderigo play to this conventional understanding when they rouse him with their cry of thievery in the night. With “is all your family within?” and “Are all doors lock’d?” (1.1.84–85), they reinforce the notion that familial integrity requires the enclosure of the house around its members and (especially for female members) their confinement within. So confident is the first-scene Brabantio of his household security that Roderigo must challenge him to seek Desdemona “in her chamber, or your house” by vowing that the Venetian senator may “Let loose on me the justice of the state” (1.1.138–39) if the alarm is false. Even then only the correspondence of an obscure dream convinces Brabantio to test this challenge to his governance. When he finds that Roderigo has told “too true an evil,” he demands, “Where didst thou see her?”; “how got she out?”; and “do you know / Where we may apprehend her, and the Moor?” “I think I can discover him,” says Roderigo, and leads Brabantio to the Sagittary (1.1.160–79).

At his first opportunity to confront his daughter directly, Brabantio does not ask of her purported elopement, “Is this true?” Instead, because as before “Belief of it oppresses me already” (1.1.143), he speaks directly to the significance of her “escape”: “Do you perceive in all this noble company, / Where most you owe obedience?” (1.3.179–80). Desdemona’s “place” in a patriarchal familial and social structure is defined by the direction in which she tenders obedience; as already implied by the dereliction of household duties suggested in her “hasty dispatch” of them, her spatial displacement implicates her in a violation of the patriarchal hierarchy as well. The issue of her obedience has been skillfully mooted by Roderigo, twice interrupting his story of her elopement to ask Brabantio’s forgiveness “If’t be your pleasure, and most wise consent” or “If this be known to you and your allowance” (1.1.121, 127). But, as...
Roderigo says, "if you have not given her leave," then is it a "gross revolt" and a "treason of the blood" (1.1.133, 134, 169), and then can Brabantio accuse himself of insufficient "tyranny" (1.3.197) as the monarch in the little world of his house.

Thus, when, in response to Othello's petition, the Duke of Venice can suggest only that she return to "her father's," Brabantio jumps to restore the integrity of his house and reclaim his authority over it with the unhesitant declaration: "I'll not have it so" (1.3.240). With her flight to the Sagittar/y and the transposition of loyalties that it represents, Desdemona has rendered herself incapable of reintegration into Brabantio's household. Even as Brabantio has asked Roderigo, "Where didst thou see her?" he has also demanded, "How didst thou know 'twas she?" (1.1.163-65). Only enchantment, magic, "foul charms," drugs, minerals, "arts inhibited" (1.2.63-79), spells, medicines, witchcraft (1.3.61-64), "practices of cunning hell," "mixtures powerful," or "some dram conjur'd" (1.3.102-105) could have transformed beyond all recognition "A maiden never bold of spirit"; otherwise it is impossible that "perfection so would err / Against all rules of nature" (1.3.94, 100-101). In other words, in abandoning his house for the Sagittar/y, Desdemona has become as alien to her father as are the monstrous creatures of Othello's story, and as insusceptible of his welcome. She might be of the same order as Lear's daughters: "Down from the waist they are Centaurs" (4.6.124).9

In his De sacramento matrimonii (translated into English in 1540), the humanist philosopher Henricus Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim writes, "He that wanteth a wife hath no house, because he hath not settled a house. Yea, and if he have [that is, if he has a house but no wife], he tarrieth in it as a stranger in his inn" (sig. C8'). With this he offers yet another indictment of the fitness of the Sagittar/y, a resort only for strangers and sojourners. But Agrippa also alludes to what was in the early modern period taken to be a natural corollary of marriage: the "settlement" of a household. In general, as Peter Laslett has demonstrated and as Agrippa here assumes, access to a house preceded any possibility of marriage.10 That which is most peculiar about Desdemona's situation is not that her father's house is no longer fit for her, not that the Sagittar/y is unfit for more than temporary sojourn, but that no fit house, with its correspondent wifely role and responsibilities, has been established for her.

In this very absence of positional alternatives in Venice, Desdemona comes to accompany Othello to the besieged Cyprus. On the even more radical unfitness of this disposition, however, the contemporary prescriptive text (and the context for the unfolding of the tragedy of Othello) could not be more
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clear. "I deny not," writes William Whately, "that the service of the country and needful private affairs may cause a just departure for (even) a long time" (sig. A4'), but he allows of nothing other than the husband's departure alone in these pursuits. Countless times repeated in the domestic conduct books is the rule that "God hath made the man to travail abroad, and the woman to keep home." It goes unsaid—because it needed no saying—that these prescriptions presuppose that a house has been "settled" for the woman's occupation.

Desdemona's sojourn at the Sagittar/y is pivotal, on the one hand representing her determination both to deny the patriarchal text that has in Brabantio's house defined and confined her and to rescript her own story along the lines laid out by Othello's tales of monsters and battles; on the other, prefiguring her commitment to move outside the Venetian social order entirely by following Othello to a "warlike isle" and the "fortitude" of a Cypriot citadel (2.3.53; 1.3.222). The father whom she leaves embodies that social order: his faith in urban civility will not admit of "robbing" because "this is Venice, / My house is not a grange"; his comfortable certainty is that in calling at "every house" in Venice, he "may command at most"; his confidence in the fellowship of patriarchs holds that "any of my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong, as 'twere their own" (1.1.105–106, 181–82; 1.2.96–97). Offered the Duke's slight and aphoristic consolation on the loss of his daughter—"The robb'd that smiles, steals something from the thief, / He robs himself, that spends a bootless grief"—Brabantio retorts, "So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile, / We lose it not so long as we can smile" (1.3.208–11). That is, even as the expectations of his world view are disappointed, he persists in his conviction of the fundamental symbiosis of political and familial structures of order, of the analogy of his displaced daughter to another vulnerable Venetian property that is besieged by infidels, of the relationship between the dis-positioned Desdemona and larger disorder. Even as this aging blocking figure is defeated, in short, he persists in maintaining for us the note of ominous irregularity with which Desdemona's marriage is inaugurated.

II

By speaking, above, of Desdemona's first-act "determination" and "commitment," I have already mooted the subject of her characterologic disposition. Her agency is an element of her character that the male characters would deny her. Brabantio, for example, first accuses Othello: "O thou foul thief, where has
thou stow'd my daughter?" (1.2.62), figuring the movements of Desdemona as those of a kind of inanimate cargo. Roderigo, too, describes her as having been "transported" to the Moor (1.1.124); Othello admits that he has "ta'en [her] away" (1.3.78); the Duke commands, "Fetch Desdemona hither" (1.3.120). Later, Othello "crave[s] fit disposition" for her (1.3.236) and, for the journey to Cyprus, turns her over to Iago: "To his conveyance I assign my wife" (1.3.285); "My Desdemona must I leave to thee" (1.3.295). In Cyprus, Cassio repeats that she has been "Left in the conduct of the bold Iago" (2.1.75) (emphasis added throughout). This verbal pattern is congruent with another (and widely recognized) set of images that characterize Desdemona as a (valuable) possession.14

Because it misrepresents Desdemona's actual first-act activity, however, this pattern exposes little more than the desire and denial of a patriarchal framework for female location. Desdemona in fact enacts her own preference for placement, unconfined by the passivity wished upon her by male language. As Roderigo indistinctly reveals, Othello has "ta'en her away" only metaphorically, through marriage. Physically, she has ta'en herself away to Othello:

... your fair daughter,
At this odd-even and dull watch o' the night,
Transported with no worse nor better guard,
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor. . . .

(1.1.122–26)

Although Roderigo resorts to a passive voice that threatens to obscure the facts, they nonetheless disclose themselves. Desdemona has traveled unprotected not only by the "better" guardage of, say, Brabantio or one of his men but even by the "worse" guardage of, again, Othello or one of his. She has traveled only with a gondolier. To follow the pattern of Roderigo's evasion of active verbs is also to suspect that Desdemona herself has employed the "knave of common hire."15 Brabantio, taking the point and echoing the diction, will later describe her as having herself "Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom" of Othello (1.2.70). The contrast between initial masculine construction and Desdemona's action fuels Roderigo's and Brabantio's respective characterizations of her elopement as a "gross revolt" and an "escape" (1.1.134; 1.3.197).16

Just as Desdemona's relocation to Cyprus is the most unfit of her physical dispositions, so her very request to accompany Othello there is the most troubling—and most portentous—instance of her agency. Before the Senate she has presumed to advance her own agenda, rejecting not only the Duke's assump-
tion that she will return to Brabantio’s house, rejecting even Othello’s notion that accommodation should be found for her in Venice, proposing instead an alternative that no man in the play would have thought to assign her to: “let me go with him.” She insists in “downright violence” and in “scorn of fortunes” that “I did love the Moor, to live with him.” Her further statement that “my heart’s subdued / Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord” scarcely obscures the fact that Othello has given no sign that it would be his pleasure for her to accompany him (1.3.248–51, 259). In this intervention she goes some way toward justifying Iago’s eventual remark of role inversion: “Our general’s wife is now the general” (2.3.305–306).

The moral import of physical disposition is clear in the early modern prescriptive record. Henry Smith, for example, indicates why, if the husband goes abroad, the wife must stay home: “Paul biddeth Titus to exhort women that they be chaste, and keeping at home: presently after chaste, he sayeth, keeping at home, as though home were chastity’s keeper.” He moralizes that “a wife should teach her feet, go not beyond the door; she must count the walls of her house like the banks of the river which Shimei might not pass, if he would please the King” (sigs. F6r–F7r). His last analogy recalls the familiar Elizabethan proverb “Every man is King in his house.” By her confinement a wife will please her husband, her proper lord; outside her house she strays into territory he cannot claim to control. Violations of positional limits expose her to suspicion of other violations, and in particular sexual violations.

That this conservative patriarchal ethos provides a text by which to read Desdemona is reinforced by the fact that a variation on it holds with respect to the other female characters in the play; Henry Smith’s further advice that “As it becometh her to keep home, so it becometh her to keep silence” (sig. F7r) might, for example, be the gloss for the responses of Cassio to Bianca and Iago to Emilia. These are precisely the ways in which Cassio finds Bianca unbecoming to him: her not keeping home and her not keeping silent. Nervous of being found “woman’d,” he greets her at her first appearance on stage with “What make you from home?” and “I’faith, sweet love, I was coming to your house” (3.4.193, 167, 169); later, he complains that “she haunts me in every place” (4.1.131) instead of confining herself to her “proper” place, at home. He follows her because “I must, she’ll rail i’the street else” (4.1.159). She offends not only as an unsilent woman but, more, by railing publicly rather than privately, in the street rather than behind the closed doors of her house. The association of female dislocation and loquacity then achieves its final significance when, for denying Desdemona’s infidelity, Emilia, too, is accused by Iago of speaking out...
of place and is remanded to her "proper" place. Having previewed the issue in commanding her to "Speak within doors" (4.2.146), he in the last scene orders her first to "charm your tongue," then to "get you home." Her "I will not charm my tongue," "I am bound to speak," "let me have leave to speak," "I hold my peace sir, no," "I'll be in speaking, liberal as the air," and "yet I'll speak" are punctuated by "Tis proper I obey him, but not now: / Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home," and, in response to his repeated "Be wise, and get you home," "I will not" (5.2.184-224). As her articulation of insurrection escalates, so does his determination to control her, until he finally silences her tongue and sends her to her last home in the play's second uxoricide.  

Just as for Brabantio, then, for Cassio and Iago the "house" or "home" is the place where a woman belongs, and the notion of displacement elaborates or exaggerates other feminine trespasses against masculine notions of order and propriety. In the persons of Cassio and Iago, the world view of Brabantio survives the first act and informs the concerns of those critics who read a number of disturbing signals in Desdemona's character and actions. We have already heard testimony of her wish that "heaven had made her such a man" as Othello; Brabantio has drawn for us the further conclusion that such hints have made her "half the wooer" (1.3.163, 176) of Othello. There is, moreover, an earlier example of self-determination of which we are repeatedly reminded: she has been described by Brabantio as "So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation" (1.2.67-68). Iago exploits the unseemliness of her discrimination in the third act, when he argues the point of view that her decision "Not to affect many proposed matches" shows in her "a will most rank, / Foul disproportion; thoughts unnatural" (3.3.233-37), and her willfulness niggles again at our consciousness when in the fourth act Emilia recalls that Desdemona has "forsook so many noble matches" (4.2.127). Iago follows the same process of insinuation and condemnation when he reminds Othello of Brabantio's warning that "She has deceiv'd her father, may do thee" (1.3.293) by suggesting that "She did deceive her father, marrying you" (3.3.210).

Modern critics have, in addition, expressed discomfort with the wit and worldliness Desdemona displays in jesting with Iago upon her arrival in Cyprus. Her aside "I am not merry, but I do beguile / The thing I am, by seeming otherwise" (2.1.122-23) is insufficient to reassure them. It is particularly noteworthy here, and particularly vexing to them, that her banter belies her own endorsement of wisely obedience; she playfully urges Emilia, "do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband" (2.1.161-62). Critics have also fretted over her willow-scene speculation that "This Lodovico is a proper man. . . . He
speaks well” (4.3.35, 37); it seems almost to confirm Iago’s prediction that her affections will wander to some more appropriate man than Othello.19

And yet, she is chaste, and, at least in the last act of the play, she is so passive and submissive that she dies on a lie rather than condemn her husband:

**Desdemona.** O, who has done this deed?

**Emilia.** Nobody, I myself, farewell:
Commend me to my kind lord, O, farewell!
(5.2.124–26)

Although she declares that “A guiltless death I die,” she exonerates Othello of responsibility for it, characterizes him as “kind,” and acknowledges him her proper “lord” (5.2.123, 126).

To many students of character-based criticism, what is finally most troubling about Desdemona is that she seems to represent some failure in Shakespeare, the failure of an inconsistency in portrayal: how can the woman who defends her love with such fearlessness and conviction in the Senate scene be reconciled with that woman who so effaces herself in death? But we have come to learn that there are dangers in overhumanizing dramatic characters, that the attempt of such reconciliation is a misguided interpretive strategy.20 Another and more useful way of reading Desdemona is to think of her as not a being from whom we should demand consistency, but rather an artfully created embodiment of female behavior and feminine responses, in all the variety and ambiguity perceived by men. In this reading, she is a pattern rather than a personality, a pattern that serves a larger dramatic purpose than characterization.

This does not mean that her pattern does not have its own logic, but, let me suggest, it is a logic that may more usefully be found in the moral (or characterologic) significances of place than in human psychology. Although in the first part of the play insistent references to displacement seem engineered to impress upon us that the newly married Othello and Desdemona live as “strangers in an inn” rather than by “settling a house,” gradually, in Cyprus, intimations of a settled domesticity accumulate. Upon his arrival there, Othello bids, “Come, let us to the castle...come, Desdemona.” He asks Iago to “disembark my coffers; / Bring thou the master to the citadel,” and Iago advises Roderigo, “meet me by and by at the citadel: I must fetch his necessaries ashore” (2.1.201–11, 278–79); as late as the fifth act, Iago bids Emilia, “run you to the citadel, / And tell my lord and lady what has happ’d” (5.1.125–26). Through the association of Desdemona with the citadel, and especially given that personal possessions are twice mentioned in the same breath as the citadel, we seem clearly intended to apprehend that Othello and Desdemona will establish resi-
dence within its walls, the “fortitude” of which is “best known” to Othello (1.3.222–23). Now, a building designed for military fortification rather than domestic occupation is clearly no more fitting than an inn for the institution of marriage.

As the tragedy unfolds, however, this fix on Othello and Desdemona’s residence slips, in a manner uniquely exploitable on the open and visually indeterminative stage of the English Renaissance. With the war “done,” the military urgency of the first act relaxes. Othello, moreover, comes to tell Desdemona, “I shall not dine at home, / I meet the captains, at the citadel” (3.3.59–60)—as if their home is elsewhere. A motif of hospitality surfaces as Othello remarks that his wife “feeds well, loves company, / Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well”; as he invites “generous islanders” to dinner (3.3.188–89, 284–85); and as the couple welcomes Lodovico and Gratiano. One early crime against Desdemona, that she travels to Cyprus with no maidservant of her own, is redeemed as Emilia gradually resolves the conflict between her loyalties to mistress and husband by accepting a preeminent allegiance to Desdemona—and as Desdemona enjoys with her woman intensely private preparations for bed, idle chatter about Lodovico, intimate memories of her childhood maid, the willow song, a philosophy of marital fidelity. Othello, who has opposed himself to “chamberers,” now finds himself imagining betrayal by his wife in “my chamber” (3.3.269; 4.1.139; emphasis added), and in the last scene, his distraught puzzling over whether to let Emilia “in” (5.2.95, 97, 105) underlines his own confinement within a “chamber” that now for the first time acquires visual definition through an aggregation of domestic props. The bed, its curtains, the wedding sheets, and the candle finally and concretely confirm the hints at an established household, so that Lodovico’s closing judgment that Gratiano shall “keep the house, / And seize upon the fortunes of the Moor” does not jar at all (5.2.366–67).

The suggestions of a conventional domestic life intensify, in other words, even as Desdemona’s unconventional independence of spirit fades, as if to confirm the power of place asserted by patriarchalists. Her discontinuous personal disposition in fact conforms to her variant physical dispositions.

III

The contradictions between Desdemona’s initial agency and her final passivity are requisite to the dramatic purpose of Othello’s tragedy. That is, while Desdemona’s innocence is necessary, so too are the elements in her that raise doubts, that exonerate Othello of comic credulity, that enable her to exemplify
all the tragic confusions about women that men hold, and that finally demonstrate the limits of patriarchalism as a text by which to read women. But even as the issue of Desdemona’s complicity in her own victimization is moot to the dramatic ethos, the issue of Othello’s part in his own tragedy is, according to the laws of genre, of the essence. How is it that this man, a man whom even Iago admits “is of a constant, noble, loving nature” and apt to “prove . . . A most dear husband” (2.1.284–86), comes to dispose of his beloved new wife by murder? To pursue the logic already proposed for Desdemona’s dispositions is to recognize in turn the tragic consequences of the facts that Othello is dispositioned himself, that he is in addition the agent of her dis-positioning, and that he comes to see such meanings in displacement as Brabantio and Iago (and patriarchal philosophy) would find there.

To begin with the second phenomenon: for Desdemona’s fateful displacements Othello must bear final responsibility, according to patriarchal convention. On this subject the prescriptive text is again unvarying. Othello is at fault for deferring domestic decision to the Senate, as the Duke intimates when with disinterest he dismisses the vexed matter of Desdemona’s accommodation: “Be it, as you shall privately determine” (1.3.275). When Othello stoops to “beseech” and “beg” the duke to “let her will / Have a free way” (1.3.260–61) in the matter, he violates the fundamental counsel (here expressed by Edmund Tilney) that the new husband must set himself to “steal away [his bride’s] private will” so as to establish from the outset the preeminence of his own. John Dod and Robert Cleaver take it for granted that among the “dutie[s] of the Husband towards his Wife” are “to be ordinarily in a dwelling place,” a “settled” house (sig. G7); Jean Bodin called it “the law of nature, which willeth, that every man should be master of his own house” (sig. C2). Othello flouts not only this residential imperative but also its variant, Dod and Cleaver’s precept that

For the first year after marriage, God would not have the husband go to war with his enemies, to the end that he and his wife might learn to know one another’s conditions and qualities, and so afterwards live in godly peace, and not to war one with another. And therefore God gave and appointed that the new married husband that year is to stay at home and settle his love, that he might not war and jar after: for that God of peace dwelleth not in the house of war.22

This statement unifies two fundamentals of domestic prescription: the import of place is wed to the commonplace that the foundation and objective of a marital relationship is peace. Othello, unhappily, is apt for neither.

He is, first (and with this we return to the characterizing phenomenon of
his displacement), a man of no fixed address. He defines himself in opposition to “chamberers” (3.3.269), as one who has made his residence instead in the “tented field” (1.3.85). Roderigo terms him “an extravagant and wheeling stranger, / Of here, and every where” (1.1.136–37); Iago, “an erring”—that is, wandering, vagabond—“barbarian” (1.3.356–57).23 If Desdemona, “within” the Sagittar/y in the second scene, realizes escape from a delimiting household through her elopement there, Othello, standing outside it, anticipates only restriction in marriage:

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea’s worth.

(1.2.25–28)

Even despite this protest of willing translation, moreover, Othello continues to resist domestic confine. Iago, warning of the “raised father and his friends” which join the “three several quests” of the Senate in search of him, urges Othello, “You were best go in,” but Othello says largely, “Not I, I must be found,” that is, found outside, unhoused, and free (1.2.29–30, 46). Only a scene later, Othello will promise the Senate that marriage will not reduce the scope of his activity; if it does, then, worst of all fates, let him be wholly domesticated, “Let housewives make a skillet of my helm” (1.3.272), in his abhorrence revealing his unaccommodated inclination. He grieves at the notion that he may be made “A fixed figure, for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving fingers at” (4.2.55–56).

He is, second (with reference to Dod and Cleaver’s insistence on peace as well as place in marriage), a man of war. He calls himself, inauspiciously, “little blest with the set phrase of peace” (1.3.82). His profession is a jealous mistress. Asking the bridegroom to “slubber the gloss of your new fortunes” by accepting a commission to Cyprus, the Duke admits that Othello’s command is not of the absolute essence: “we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency”; mere “opinion, a sovereign mistress of effects”—nothing more tangible—“throws a more safer voice on you.” Yet Othello defers to this “sovereign mistress” and to a “tyrant custom” that he cannot alter overnight, even despite the night this is. The ruling metaphor of his acceptance—that this custom “Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down” (1.3.223–31)—indicates at least a dim recognition that his “new fortunes” properly involve the marriage bed, the “right and lawful use” of which William
Perkins defines as "an essential duty of marriage" (424). Othello's muddled attempt to assure the Senate that his "appetite" will not interfere with their commission further suggests his apprehension of the tension between marital consummation and martial occupation (1.3.261-74). Repeated figurative commingling of the military and the marital—"'tis the soldiers' life, / To have their balmy slumbers wak'd with strife," he will tell Desdemona in Cyprus (2.3.249-50)—highlights the incompatibility of Othello's occupation with the universally understood goal of marriage. And the prevalence and suggestive power of linguistic links between love and violence in the play offer another hint of Othello's susceptibility (through his occupation) to domestic murder.

Despite the twin values of place and peace put forth in the idealizing literature of marriage, for Othello marriage itself is in fact psychologically disquieting, profoundly disquieting, and far more dangerous than his martial occupation. He is defeated by the doubts of sure domestic ownership that are nurtured by Iago rather than by the Turkish challenge to the Venetian title to Cyprus. The fact that it is marriage that instead will subjugate him is hinted in the reference to Desdemona as "our great captain's captain" (2.1.74) and in Iago's remark that "His soul is so infetter'd to her love... her appetite shall play the god / With his weak function" (2.3.336-39). Othello seems to encourage his own overmastering when he tells Desdemona that he has given her a handkerchief that did "subdue my father / Entirely" to the love of his mother (3.4.57-58) and when he muses that Desdemona "might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks" (4.1.180-81). Further, marriage initiates him into the sexuality of the centaur, under the sign of which he commences it, and so disorders his self-image that he who had celebrated his free condition is finally reduced to the cry of pathos, "Where should Othello go?" (5.2.272).

The cumulative signs of domestic instantiation that modulated our understanding of Desdemona's disposition also can be seen to participate in Othello's fatal jealousy: his acquisition of the trappings of a household reverberates with his discovery of the anxiety of possession:

O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites!

(3.3.272-74)

Here Othello elucidates a key problematic of the patriarchal system as a text; it both asserts possession and finds possession always uncertain. In this, the psychology of jealousy is compounded by the patriarchal logic of place.
Members of Othello’s audience are invited to collude in Othello’s jealousy and experience his tragedy. They witness all Desdemona’s violations of domestic prescription: her willfulness in half-wooing Othello, in fleeing her father’s house, in electing to accompany Othello to Cyprus. But then there are patterns of doubt that work independently of character and plot, suspicions that can resonate only in the minds of the audience. Desdemona’s banter with Iago at the dockside, her advice to Emilia not to learn from her husband, her vow to make Othello’s bed “a school, his board a shrift” (3.3.24), her willow-scene speculation about Lodovico—all of these hints at impropriety that have so troubled critics of the play are unseen, unheard, unknown by Othello, incapable of fueling his jealousy. In fact, they may trouble critics precisely because they work only upon the audience, inviting each (male) member of it to share Othello’s doubts, to associate himself with Othello in questioning the nature of this woman and the nature of women. And some critics, even knowing Desdemona’s chastity with a certainty unavailable to first viewers or readers of the play, have succumbed to the temptation thus offered and placed upon Desdemona the burden of responsibility for her victimization. How much more easily were members of the play’s first audience infected with suspicion—and then brought to a terrible self-recognition at the denouement, when confronted with Desdemona’s unimpeachable innocence. Those so snared have also shared Lodovico’s shuddering response to “the tragic lodging of this bed”: “the object poisons sight, / Let it be hid” (5.2.364–66).26

In this they experience in full the double-edged nature of patriarchalism: that is, that the absolute responsibility asserted for the husband carries its own jeopardy. As Dod and Cleaver admit, if a woman errs, “it is for the most part through the fault, and want of discretion, and lack of good government in the husband” (sig. L6'). For this reason uxoricide is among the most heinous of crimes. Because a woman’s nature is weak and susceptible, her behavior is the responsibility of her husband, and the husband who finds in his wife a fault grave enough to warrant her death admits of the gravest failure in himself. Those who are implicated in Othello’s tragedy by sympathy with his suspicions may discover proportionate self-blame.

Othello’s own self-condemnation for his action is stern: “nothing extenuate,” he says (5.2.343). If they wish, however, members of the audience can find their own extenuation. Too terrible a process of audience identification with Othello can be subverted by his very distinctions and peculiarities: his race, his occupation, his extravagant otherness. Further, according to the tragic paradigm of Othello, this man has no “place”; this man is dedicated to war; and
this man is subjected to the practices of the evil intelligence of an Iago; thus is
this man, unlike other men, even other jealous men, a wife murderer. This dis-
tancing from him is the only amelioration of a tragedy based on the everyday
relationships of male and female, on the essential unknowableness of the fe-
male to the male, and on man’s ability to do such violence. The process of re-
storati on that generally concludes Shakespeare’s tragedies of state is aborted
here, where only this amelioration offers any relief from confrontation with the
tragic possibilities in human relationship.

This is the tragedy that Othello realizes in gender—the notion of gender,
that is, that is constructed by patriarchalism. In Desdemona we find all the
warning signals of unchastity that would have been recognized by Henry
Smith, John Dod, Robert Cleaver, and a score of their fellow authors. But here
all those signs are wrong. The patriarchal logic of place and its moral import
works its way through the plot of Othello but is defeated by so simple and un-
arguable a fact as Desdemona’s innocence. Her innocence exposes the predic-
tive incapacity of patriarchalism and is in this respect subversive of its concep-
tual power.

NOTES

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encouraging responses to that early version. A later version of this work has been pub-
lished in chapter 4 of my Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation En-

1. Although I have found Ross’s edition of Othello particularly useful, for the con-
venience of the reader all citations to the play are from the New Arden Shakespeare,
edited by Ridley. Citations from plays other than Othello are from the Riverside Shake-
speare.

2. Ridley notes that “the passage seems overloaded with words expressing ‘suit-
ability’” (34). Ross provides the glosses “assignment to some appropriate residence and
allowance of money for maintenance” and “such befitting arrangements [for her] . . .
as corresponds with her upbringing” (37). Elliott also finds “anxiety” in Othello’s over-
loaded language (6).

3. Ross first raised the question of the significance of the naming of the Sagittary
in “The Shakespearean Othello” (566–71). For other views of the relevance of the cen-
taur image to Othello, see Hansen, and also Elliott (252–53).
4. I except "love" from this noun sequence because it participates in a different sequence, the hate-love dichotomy.

5. See especially the notes in the New Variorum (25–26), and see Ridley (13) and the Ross edition (12). In Errors, the Centaur is explicitly identified as an inn (1.2.14, 23). While the Sagittarius is never so identified, it is distinguished from more familiar forms of residence by the many references to Brabantio's house, Bianca's house, and the military quarters of Iago, Roderigo, and Cassio.


7. Spurgeon concludes that "more than half the animal images in the play are Iago's, and all these are contemptuous or repellent" (335).

8. McAlindon terms this "her first dissociation from the world of domestic reality and common duties" (115); Erickson also recognizes that "through Othello's story she gains access to a larger world beyond the domestic realm that presently confines her" (91); and Stallybrass remarks how she "is drawn from 'house affairs' (1.3.147) to tales of an undomesticated landscape 'of antres vast and deserts idle.' . . . And her withdrawal from house affairs and the government of her father marks her out as 'untamed' " (136). Greenblatt pursues another set of analogies between Othello's tales ("the Cannibals, that each other eat") and Desdemona's behavior (she would "with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse") in order to suggest that Othello "has a dim intimation of his fate" (238). In this regard the association of the centaur with cannibalism in Chester may be of interest. I differ from Knight, who suggests that reference to the "house affairs" establishes "a certain domestic femininity about" Desdemona (107–108).

9. Lear's association is glossed by Topsell: "Centaurs . . . are described by the poets to have their forepart like men, and their hinder part like horses, the occasion whereof is thus related by Pindarus: that Centaurus the son of Ixion committed buggery with the mares of Magnetia, under the mountain Pelius, from whence came that monstrous birth in the upper part resembling the father and in the nether the mother" (sig. Gg1'). The association of the centaur with sexuality was undoubtedly reinforced by the fact that the part of the body governed by the sign of Sagittarius is the thigh, that almanac illustrations served to make Sagittarius and the thigh synonymous, and that the thigh has a long tradition as a code word for the seat of sexuality.

10. The necessity of housing helps account for the relatively late age at marriage in the early modern period, according to Laslett: "marriage could not come about unless a slot fell vacant and the aspiring couple was able to fill it up. It might be a cottage . . . which became available" (101).

11. Whately (sig. A4'); see also, for example, Smith (sig. E2'); Dod and Cleaver (sig. M4'–M5'); Dillingham (sig. I6'); Gainsford (fol. 101'). In The Comedy of Errors, Adriana asks, "Why should their liberty than ours be more?" and Luciana answers, "Because their business still lies out a' door" (2.1.10–11).

12. Neill suggests that "the importance of Venice as the metropolitan center of the
play world is that it supplies, or offers to supply, each individual with a clearly defined and secure position within an established social order” (118).

13. In his edition, Ross notes that “other Shakespearean meanings of this word [‘conveyance’] support the audience’s anticipatory qualms about the meaning of this plan—particularly: (1) removal; (2) document by which transference of property is effected; (3) underhand dealing” (42).

14. See, for example, Burke and Snow (386).

15. The common notion that Cassio escorts Desdemona to Othello is undoubtedly read back from the later description of him as intermediary between the two during their courtship. It is explicitly contradicted by this passage as well as by Cassio’s more immediately relevant scene 2 ignorance of the marriage and of Othello’s location, so that in the first act at least (and perhaps only) we are given to understand Desdemona’s independence of movement.

16. Greenblatt writes, “The safe passage of the female from father to husband is irreparably disrupted, marked as an escape” (240).

17. Ridley also notes that Othello does not hint that Desdemona might accompany him, “with whatever alacrity he welcomes the suggestion when she makes it” (35).

18. Bianca’s loquacity has often been noticed in the criticism; her dislocation has been noted by Stallybrass (127), who also observes that “silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to woman’s enclosure within the house” and that “Emilia must open the closed mouth, the locked house” (127, 142).

19. Garner addresses both Desdemona’s reference to Lodovico and her character in more complex ways than is common. For a review of prevailing critical trends (and some responses to them), see also Neely, Adamson, and Cook.

20. In “When Is a Character Not a Character? Desdemona, Olivia, Lady Macbeth, and Subjectivity,” chapter 3 of Faultlines, Alan Sinfield provides a more detailed review of the perils of “character criticism.” He concludes that “Desdemona has no character of her own; she is a convenience in the story of Othello, Iago, and Venice” (54). I am grateful for his sympathetic reading of this essay in its earlier stages. On this subject, see also Adelman (chapter 3), Belsey, and Stallybrass (141).

21. Of particular interest is the link between sexual possession and conquest of the will. Tilney writes in full: “In this long and troublesome journey of matrimony, the wise man may not be contented only with his spouse’s virginity, but by little and little must gently procure that he may also steal away her private will and appetite, so that of two bodies there may be made one only heart” (sig. B6'). Dod and Cleaver echo: “The husband ought not to be satisfied that he hath robbed his wife of her virginity, but in that he hath possession and use of her will” (sig. M4'). Both continue that this advice is essential to marital peace.

22. Dod and Cleaver (sig. P4'). They repeat with small variation a passage included in Smith (sig. F1'); Perkins’s marginal note to a similar statement reveals that the ultimate source is biblical, Deuteronomy 24:5: “When a man hath taken a new wife, he
shall not go out to war, neither shall he be charged with any business: but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer up his wife which he hath taken.” Perkins says that marital duties are “principally two: cohabitation and communion” (423).

23. For “errring,” see the OED. Neill suggests that Othello’s “account of himself as a placeless wanderer” “awakened” Desdemona’s “romantic response” (126).

24. This figurative encroachment of the military upon the marital is a motif that recurs also when Iago suggestively describes the “opposition bloody” of Cassio and Roderigo as having begun with them “In quarter, and in terms, like bride and groom, / Devasting them to bed” (2.3.171–75). McAlindon notes that the interruption of the nuptial night “confirms that the precarious balance between the domestic and the military worlds has broken down” (103).

25. On this subject see Snow and also Cavell.

26. Bradley seems relieved that “the bed where she is stifled was within the curtains [an arguable assumption], and so, presumably, in part, concealed,” for he finds the play characterized by “a violence or brutality the effect of which is unnecessarily painful and rather sensational than tragic” (183–85). Davison notes the intense reactions that the play provokes: “What is surprising, perhaps, is the degree of acrimony, personal acrimony, betrayed by some critics towards one another or even towards Othello, in their discussions of this play” (10).

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Implicating Othello


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