

The threads of this argument may recall Othello's own confusion in the temptation scene:

I think my wife be honest, and think she is not;
I think that thou art just, and think thou art not. (3.3.385-86)

I think this play is racist, and I think it is not. But Othello's example shows me that if I insist on resolving the contradiction, I will forge only lies and distortion. As this exploration of texts has shown, the discourse of racial difference is inescapably embedded in the play just as it was embedded in Shakespeare's culture and our own. To be totally free of racism, one would have to invent a new language with no loaded words, no color discriminations, and no associations of blackness with evil, whiteness with good. White and black are opposed in the play's language – in what we hear – and in what we see during performance. When Shakespeare tackled Cinthio's tale of a Moor and his ancient, he had no choice but to use this discourse. Shakespeare, and we, are necessarily implicated in its tangled web.

The wonder of *Othello* is that Shakespeare was able to exploit the full complexity of that discourse, showing expectations gone topsyturvy with a white villain opposed to a black man of heroic proportion. Even though the predominant typology of white over black is only temporarily subverted in fits and starts within the play, that subversion is itself an incredible artistic triumph.

As the performance history of *Othello* shows, Shakespeare's manipulation of white and black has never lost box-office appeal. The play has admittedly enjoyed varied interpretations and emphases through the centuries, with its racial themes muted in the Restoration and eighteenth century, accentuated in the twentieth. The confrontation it portrays between black and white continues to touch our deepest prejudices, fears, and hopes.

CHAPTER 4

Marital discourse: husbands and wives

[W]hat should such a fool / Do with so good a wife?

(5.2.831-32)

The progression of chapters in Part I, beginning with global contexts and ending with the marriage bed, would have struck an Elizabethan reader as entirely appropriate. It was a commonplace of Renaissance sermons, pamphlets, and treatises that the family was the state in microcosm. The husband was its governor, the wife and children his loyal and obedient subjects. Just as civilized societies like England and Venice must use vigilance and force to preserve their integrity against barbarous enemies, the watchful husband must repel the forces – particularly erotic impulses – that disrupt marital harmony.¹

Robert Cleaver's popular marriage treatise, *A Godly Forme of Household Government* exemplifies this patriarchal power structure; the wife must obey, for "if she be not subject to her husband, to let him rule all household, especially outward affaires: if she will make head against him, and seeke to haue her owne waies, there will be doing and vndoing. Things will goe backwarde, the house will come to ruine."² Edmund Tilney's *The Flower of Friendship* admonishes, "let hir induevor to increase a perfection of love, and above all imbrace chastitie. For the happinesse of matrimonie, doth consist in a chaste matrone."³ Moral treatises like Cleaver's and Tilney's consistently

¹ For a valuable overview of English Renaissance marriage tracts, see Valerie Wayne's introduction to Edmund Tilney's *The Flower of Friendship: A Renaissance Dialogue Concerning Marriage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 1-93.

² R. Cleaver, *A Godly Forme of Household Government for the Ordering of Private Families, According to the Direction of Gods Word* (London: Printed by Thomas Creede for Thomas Man, 1603), p. 88. Cleaver's treatise was extremely popular. The *Short Title Catalogue* lists nine editions, beginning in 1598 and running to 1624; I quote from the 1603 edition as the closest to the time of *Othello*'s composition.

³ Tilney, *Flower of Friendship*, p. 128.

argue that by her speech, the wife disrupts household harmony, by her unchastity she subverts patrilineal inheritance, and by her disobedience she destroys right rule and order in her little state. In these admonitions the treatises reveal the contradictions inherent in Renaissance marriage ideology, for the ability to disrupt, subvert, and destroy provides, in a sense, the ability to control.

Fear of the "feminine" — passion, sexual appetite, unruliness — underlies Cleaver's and Tilney's construction of gender roles. And these are the fears that Iago uses so successfully to turn Othello from Desdemona. Critics of the Renaissance construction of gender have, accordingly, found the patriarchal structure of *Othello* ripe territory for investigation. They have reexamined Othello's psychology and have often found in masculine codes of behavior the root of his tragedy and in Desdemona's submission to patriarchal ideology a cause of her victimization. While these views are well known, a brief survey of interpretations from the 1980s will set Othello and Desdemona's marriage within this modernist context.

Irene Dash was a pioneer in the decade's reassessment of Othello and Desdemona in *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare* (1981). Dash argued that while Desdemona is initially portrayed as a spirited and independent woman, marriage to a soldier subjects her to conventions that regulate her behavior. Gradually she loses her self-confidence. Like Emilia, a precursor of modern "battered wives," Desdemona abandons her ability to think for herself. Both women are portrayed as victims of patriarchal marriage conventions.⁴

Carol Thomas Neely also sought to reevaluate male and female characters in *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (1985). For Neely, the play's central conflict is between men and women. Cassio, Iago, and Othello, she contended, do not measure up to Renaissance ideals of courage and manliness; their competition leads to aggression that ultimately destroys the women they fight over. Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, "in contrast, are indifferent to reputation and partially free of vanity, jealousy, and competitiveness." The play's tragic ending does not reconcile the men and women; if anything, "the separation between them widens."⁵

⁴ Irene Dash, "A Woman Tamed: Othello," *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 103-30.

⁵ Carol Thomas Neely, "Women and Men in Othello," *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 105-35; quotes from pp. 122 and 134.

Neely disagreed with Dash's view that there is a radical shift in Desdemona from the play's initial scenes to the willow song scene; "Desdemona's spirit, clarity, and realism do not desert her entirely in the latter half of the play."⁶ Even so, many have wondered why the young woman who stood against her father before the Venetian Senate goes so submissively to her death. Peter Salllybrass maintained in 1986 that in the first half of the play, Desdemona is an active agent. When she becomes "the object of surveillance," however, she must be purified. The play thereby "constructs two different Desdemonas: the first, a woman capable of 'downright violence' (1.3.249); the second 'a maiden never bold' (1.3.94)."⁷ Instead of looking for psychological consistency in her characterization (and needing, in consequence, plausible explanations for any changes in behavior), we must see her refracted through patriarchy's bifurcated lens.

Critics of the 1980s have also seen Othello as patriarchy's victim. Stephen Greenblatt began the exploration of the hero's sexual anxiety in 1980 with his analysis of Othello's longing "for a final release from desire, from the dangerous violence, the sense of extremes, the laborious climbing and falling out of control that is experienced in the tempest." Greenblatt noted that the early Church fathers and Renaissance marriage manuals counselled "that the active pursuit of pleasure in sexuality is damnable."⁸ Desdemona's frank, erotic submission troubles Othello and renders him credulous. In the same year Edward A. Snow took a more openly psychoanalytic position: Othello demonstrates repressed guilt and disgust with coition itself. According to Snow, Othello sees Desdemona's sexuality as sinful and himself as both cuckold and adulterer. The superego within him tries to destroy his own erotic impulses by destroying Desdemona.⁹

Equally psychoanalytic is Marianne Novy's analysis of gender relations in *Othello*. Novy contended that Othello's compulsion to subdue womanish passion and his desire to assert his manliness are

⁶ Neely, *Broken Nuptials*, p. 116.

⁷ Peter Salllybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 123-42, esp. p. 141.

⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, "The Improvvisation of Power," *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 227-54; quotes from pp. 243 and 249.

⁹ Edward A. Snow, "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things," *English Literary Renaissance*, 10 (1980): 384-412.

symptoms of a "fantasy of love as fusion with a woman both maternal and virginal." Othello is fixated, in other words, on "a symbiosis possible only for the mother and infant before the infant's discovery of sex." After the temptation scene, Othello reasserts the masculine code of revenge in a final effort to dominate and control Desdemona.¹⁰ Patriarchal psychology is also the key to Coppelia Kahn's gloss on cuckoldry in *Othello*. The Elizabethan and Jacobean preoccupation with cuckoldry stemmed, according to Kahn, from (1) misogyny (the belief that women are inherently lustful), (2) the double standard, and (3) patriarchal marriage's belief that a husband's honor is dependent on his wife's chastity. *Othello* embodies all three causes. It shows a husband becoming convinced of the veracity of fears he already harbors about women.¹¹

This brief survey demonstrates that recent discussions of Desdemona and Othello use modern psychological and psychoanalytic theories to assess and understand their relationship. Such treatments imply what C. S. Lewis called the doctrine of the unchanging human heart — the assumption that human nature now is much the same as it was in the Renaissance and that modern concepts and Freudian terminology can accurately describe Shakespeare's characters.¹² But these paradigms were not Shakespeare's. His age was interested in human psychology and marital relationships, but its rhetoric and categories were quite different from those of the late twentieth century. My purpose is to examine the sources and contexts available to Shakespeare as he composed *Othello* and to analyze how Renaissance marital discourse affected the construction of Othello and Desdemona.

Two such attempts have already been made for Desdemona. In *Shakespeare and His Social Context* Margaret Loftus Ranald urged a reevaluation of Desdemona's behavior in light of Renaissance homilies, ballads, canon laws, and marriage treatises. These sources unfailingly preach the importance of wifely submission. They emphasize female chastity, the need for parental permission before marriage, and the importance of tact, discretion, and circumspection in any wife. Desdemona violates this code repeatedly — in her

clandestine marriage, in entertaining Cassio without Othello's permission, in speaking for Cassio despite Othello's evident displeasure, and in concerning herself with affairs outside the household. In short, "if one keeps in mind the precepts of the courtesy books, Desdemona is at fault in her wifely conduct and innocently supplies the evidence that leads to her own death through her assertion of her own independence."¹³

Mary Beth Rose also situated Desdemona within the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean marital discourse, but her approach is more positive. Rose argued that Desdemona "presents herself to the Senate as a hero of marriage." In accord with Puritan marital tracts, Desdemona "analogizes public and private life, drawing them together and granting them equal distinction." Othello, however, falls short of the Puritan heroic ideal of marriage by insisting on a hierarchy that subordinates the private to the public. He is unable to embrace the patience and humility required by a heroic marriage. Eventually Desdemona retreats into passive victimization.¹⁴

As Rose indicates, Desdemona's initial independence, however transgressive of dominant ideologies, is a major aspect of her appeal. And she was not alone. Other Jacobean tragedies — *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* come readily to mind — highlighted women who violated patriarchy's codes. Though their voices were stopped by tragic conclusions, Vittoria, the Duchess, and Cleopatra asserted their independence and spoke their mind, giving voice to feelings transgressive of patriarchal constructions.

If Desdemona's outspokenness violates Renaissance marriage ideology, so does Othello's behavior. By marrying a younger woman of a different social station, he ignores Cleaver's warning that there should be "a wise and holy regard had of equality in yeeres, of an agreement in religion, of similitude in nature, in manners, in outward estate, condition and qualite of person, and such like necessarie circumstances. For what is more vnnmeet, then for an olde person to promise to bee contracted to a young one?"¹⁵ Ideally, concludes Tlney's Master Pedro, husbands should be no more than four or five years older than their wives.¹⁶

¹⁰ Marianne L. Novy, "Marriage and Mutuality in *Othello*," *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 125-49; quotes from pp. 133 and 132.

¹¹ Coppelia Kahn, "'The Savage Yoke': Cuckoldry and Marriage," *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 119-50.

¹² See C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 3-4.

¹³ Margaret Loftus Ranald, "The Indiscretions of Desdemona," *Shakespeare and His Social Context: Essays in Ornithic Knowledge and Literary Interpretation* (New York: AMS Press, 1987), pp. 135-52, esp. p. 151.

¹⁴ Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 131-55; quotations from p. 138.

¹⁵ Cleaver, *Household Government*, p. 131. ¹⁶ Tlney, *Flower of Friendship*, p. 110.

Marriage to a younger woman makes Othello particularly susceptible to concerns about the control of her sexual appetite.¹⁷ Possession is the issue. Tilney defines jealousy as "a certaine care of mans minde, least another shoulde possesse the thing, which he alone would enjoye. There is no greater torment, than the vexation of a jealous minde."¹⁸ Cleaver warns that when a husband or wife becomes jealous, "they beleue euery word that they heare spoken touching theyr passion, albeit it beare no apparance of truth."¹⁹

Othello errs in believing Iago in the first place. In *Tell-Trothas New Years Gift* Robin Goodfellow exposes "Ill counsel" as a primary cause of jealousy. Often the wicked

(whose imaginations are only to see discitions by brutting euill supposes, bred of a suspicious braine & vttered with colored hypocrisie) labour to sette debate betwene true hartes, and to shuffle in suspicion amongst those that are free from thought thereof. They will strue to perswade by liklyhood & confirme ascerions with false oathes[.]... their heads studying how to bring them to like of the practise of their premeditated mischiefe... They will talte tales as if fraught with truth: and vtter slanders, with protestations. They will inuent to perswade, and sweare to confirme.²⁰

As Valerie Wayne persuasively argues, Othello soon becomes entwined in Iago's discourse of misogyny, a discourse that defined woman as whore and was directed against marriage itself. Iago's misogyny is but one of several ideologies about women and marriage that interact within the play.²¹ Moreover, Iago's speech acts – protesting, inventing, and swearing – were well-known slanderous devices. Othello's readiness to believe them violates the pamphlets' and treatises' everyday wisdom far more than Desdemona's behavior violates the marriage manuals.

* * *

These treatises concern a husband and wife's daily behavior, outlining what men and women should and shouldn't do. On the whole they do not address the question of why men and women act as they do. Yet texts concerned with human psychology were available to Shakespeare when he was writing *Othello*. The terms used

¹⁷ Cf. January in Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*.

¹⁸ Tilney, *Flower of Friendship*, p. 122.

¹⁹ Cleaver, *Household Government*, p. 186.

²⁰ Anon., *Tell-Trothas New Years Gift Being Robin Good-felloes Newes...* With His Ome Inuention

Against Idely (London: Imprinted by Robert Bourne, 1593), sig. B₂r.

²¹ Valerie Wayne, "Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello*," in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 153–79.

to describe the human mind were obviously not Freudian, but there was nonetheless a significant attempt to understand human passions, where they come from, and how they manifest themselves in a marital relationship.

One of the primary passions in Jacobean texts is jealousy. Shakespeare's fascination with the workings of the jealous mind is evident not just in *Othello* but also in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Winter's Tale*. In all but *The Merry Wives* (where jealousy is more of a Jonsonian humor), the sudden pathological transformation of a man's love into hate results in violence against a woman. To understand this passion in the context of Shakespeare's time, it will be helpful to examine Thomas Wright's lengthy and influential study, *The Passions of the Minde in Generale*. Shakespeare probably knew Wright's work. A truncated version appeared in 1601, and the corrected and expanded edition of 1604, dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, might have been available in manuscript before publication. If the dramatist did study Wright, he found not just theoretical discussion of human emotions but a detailed outline of how passions are revealed through speech and gesture. In other words, Wright's analysis would have provided abundant verbal and visual material for someone interested in representations of human conflict on the stage.

Wright defined a passion as "a sensual motion of our appetitive facultie, through imagination of some good or ill thing." Such "affections" influence, in turn, the bodily humors, causing perturbations that corrupt the judgment and seduce the will.²² If such passions are not "moderated according to reason... immediately the soule is molested with some maladic." At the same time, passions should not be completely extinguished, "but sometimes to be moved, and stirred vp for the service of vertue." Passions can stir up "slugghish and idle soules,"²³ and if they are moderated with "right reason," they can lead to good effects. If left unchecked, however, they inevitably result in destruction. Wright uses the same political analogy Cleaver employed to describe the family; inordinate affections, he wrote, in "many waies disquiet the Minde, and trouble the peaceable state of this pettie commonweale of our soule."²⁴ The

²² Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generale* (London: Printed by Valentine Simmes for Walter Burre, 1604), p. 8. I was first directed to Wright's analysis of human behavior by Professor Keir Egan at a workshop sponsored by the Folger Institute's Center for Shakespeare Studies.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

central issue for both marital relations and the individual mind is control; in each case, feminine or womanish emotions are feared as destabilizing forces.²⁵

Wright cautioned that the heart of a passionate man becomes "tossed like the Sea with contrary windes." And like a storm at sea, passion can suddenly appear from nowhere: "some times a man will bee in the prime of his ioy, and presently a sea of griefe overwhelmeth him."²⁶ When passion does strike, claimed Wright, it demands immediate satisfaction:

Inordinate Passions... neither observe time nor place: but vpon every occasion would be leaping into action, importuning execution. Let a man fall a praying or studying; or be busie in any negotiation [of] importance, and very often he shal feele a headlesse Passion to rush in vpon him, importuning him even then to leave all, and prosecute revenge... or some other vnbridled desire."²⁷

Motivation is not an issue for Wright. Passion is a given of human nature, like the need to eat and sleep. Thus to Wright it is not necessary to explain sudden changes in behavior. The problem is to resist sudden changes, to bridle desire, put a head on passion, and maintain a calm and tranquil mind.

Even if Shakespeare did not know Wright *per se*, he would have found in the texts he did use abundant descriptions of sudden, seemingly inexplicable changes in a husband's personality. These "perturbations of the mind" center on the husband's desire for his wife, his ensuing jealousy, and his subsequent murder of the woman who aroused such passions in the first place.

Richard Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes* offers a rich example. Scholars have longed recognized this text as a source for details of the Venetian-Turkish wars,²⁸ but they have not considered Knolles' account of Bassa Ionuses and his wife Manto as a precursor of Othello and Desdemona. Because this section of Knolles is so little known, I quote at length:

This great Bassa, whilst he yet liued and flourished in the court, in nothing so much offended the minds of the people (who generally both loued and honoured him) as by the crueltie by him shewed vpon the person of the faire ladie *Manto* his best beloued wife... [T]his great Bassa *Ionuses* [...] finding her outward perfections graced with no lesse inward vertues; and her honourable mind answerable vnto her rare feature, tooke her vnto his wife; honouning her farre above all the rest of his wives and concubines: and she againe in all dutifull loyaltie seeking to please him, for a space liued in all worldly felicitie and blisse, not much inferior vnto one of the great Sultannes... For in short time, the Bassa more amorous of her person than secured in her vertues, and after the manner of sensuall men still fearing least that which so much pleased himselfe... began to haue her in distrust, although he saw no great cause why, more than his owne conceit, not grounded vpon any her euill demeanor, but vpon the excesse of his owne liking. Which mad humour (hardly to be euer purged) of it selfe still more and more in him encreasing, he became so froward and impetuous, that nothing she could say or doe could now so please or content him, but that he still thought some one or other, although he wist not who, to be therein partakers with him. So fearful was the jealous man of his owne conceits.

Exhausted by his jealous tirades, Manto made plans to escape which were treacherously disclosed to her husband, "Who therewith enraged, and calling her vnto him, forthwith in his furie, with a dagger stabd her to the heart and slew her: so together with the death of his loue, hauing cured his tormenting jealousy."²⁹ Notice that by this account Manto does nothing until the end to provoke the Bassa's jealousy. The root cause is what Wright calls an "inordinate affection," leading to perturbation of the mind. Or, in Emilia's words, jealous souls "are not ever jealous for the cause; / But jealous for they're jealous. 'Tis a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself" (3.4.154-56). The Bassa succumbs because he is "more amorous of her person than secured in her vertues;" he is a sensual man who feared "least that which so much pleased himselfe, gaue no lesse contentment to others."³⁰ Once his passion is aroused, Ionuses will believe anything of his wife. The only way to still his beating mind is to destroy her.

While I cannot prove that Shakespeare had this passage in mind as he composed *Othello*, he must at least have noted the engravings of

²⁵ Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (London: Printed by Adam Islip, 1603), p. 557.

²⁶ Manto's desire to destroy his wife, caused by his erotic feelings toward her, perhaps indicates what Snow describes as a "pathological male animus toward sexuality." See Snow, "Sexual Anxiety," 388.

²⁷ The repetition of the "kingdom" analogy from the family to the microcosmic individual may seem like a recycled version of Tillyard's "doctrine of correspondences," and in some sense, it is. The analogy does exist in Elizabethan and Jacobean texts, especially homiletic texts that exhort control of possible threats to order and stability. While Tillyard assumed that everyone in the English Renaissance subscribed to this ideology, I see it as a furious effort to contain that which could not be contained. Although it is currently fashionable to discard Tillyard altogether, I suggest we leave his dogmatism behind but continue to use his concepts where they are relevant. See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959).

²⁸ See chapter 1 above, pp. 24-25.

²⁹ Wright, *Passions*, p. 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

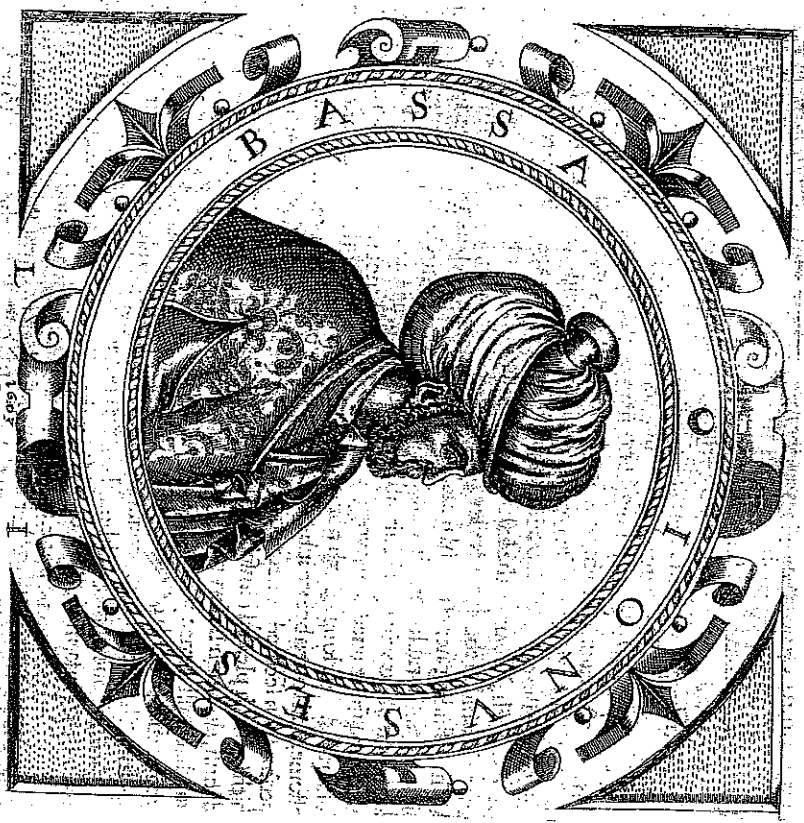


Figure 4. (See facing page.)

Ionuses and Manto on folios 558 and 559 of Knolles' text. Manto is the only woman portrayed in this richly illustrated volume. Under her portrait Knolles printed a commemorative poem:

If feature braue thou doest respect, thou canst none
 fairer see,
 Nor in whose chast and constant brest could greater
 graces lie.
 But whilst mismatcht she liu'd to mourne, enthrald to
 jealous braine,
 Vnhappie she, with cruell hand was by her husband
 slaine.³¹

³¹ Knolles, *Generall Historie*, p. 559.



Figure 4 and 5: Sultan Ionuses and his wife Manto from Richard Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603).

While skimming Knolles for background, Shakespeare may have noticed Manto's picture and Knolles' poem. Curiosity whetted, he could easily have turned to page 557 to read of her life and death.

The dramatist would also have encountered a more detailed account of perturbed masculine affection if, as Paul Siegel argues, he used Geoffrey Fenton's *Tragical Discourses* as a source for *Othello*.³² Fenton began his translation of Bandello's Discourse IV with a theatrical metaphor: "I have here to expose unto you a myserable accident, happening in our tyme, which shall serve as a bloody skaffolde, or theaterye, wherein are presented such as play no partes

³² See Paul N. Siegel, "A New Source for *Othello*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 75 (1960): 480.

but in mortal and furious tragedieis."³³ This scaffold will demonstrate that "jalousy is an evil exceeding all the tormentes of the world, supplantinge oftentimes bothe wytt and reason."³⁴ Fenton then narrated the story of an "Albanoyse captain" who marries a woman "constant wythout cause or argument of dishonesty, and that (whiche is the chiefest ornament and decoracion of the beautie of a woman) to bee of disposition readye to obeye her husbande, yelinge hymn suffrainyue with a deuifull obedience."³⁵ Like Knolles' Bassa, this Albanoyse captain, "doating wythout discrecion uppou the desyer of his newe lady, and rather drowned beastely in the superfluitie of her love than waighing rightly the meryte and vertue of true affection, entred into such teares of fervent jelowisie, that every fe that wafeth afore her made hym sweate at the browes with the suspicion he had of her bewty."³⁶ Once again, the husband's excessive and sensual desire for his wife leads to obsessive jealousy. The wife's virtuous behavior only confirms the husband's suspicions: "the more she sought to prefer a show of sinceritie and honestie of life, the more grew the furye and rage of his perverse fancie, thinking the compaignye and fellowship of his wife to be as indifferente to others as peculiar to himselfe."³⁷ Despite his savage fury, the wife continues to show her love and duty. Finally, to relieve his "hagarde mynde" and his unnatural fury "far exceedinge the savage and brutische maner of the tiger, Lyon, or libarde, bredd in the desertes of Affrike, the common norse of monsters and creatures civil without reason," he embraced and kissed her, then killed her by slashing her ten or twelve times. His knife penetrated her head, her arms, and even her legs in a violent orgasm, so that "no parte shoulde escape free from the stroke of his malice."³⁸ For the Turkish Bassa and the Albanoyse captain, violence against the wife is not an attempt to restore lost honor so much as a desperate effort to relieve the pressure of pent-up passions. With the wife's death, the object of the husband's inordinate affection is removed; the violence provides, in Wright's words, "a firme rest" and satisfaction of the "streame of his Passions."³⁹

According to Fenton, the Albanoyse captain's jealous rage comes from excess passion, not from outside provocation. Othello's passionate love, expressed on the Cyprus quay, is initially kept in check by

³³ Geffraie (Geoffrey) Fenton, *Certaine Tragicall Discourses of Bandello* (London: David Nutt, 1898), vol. 1, p. 165.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-89.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

³⁶ Wright, *Parsons*, p. 74.

Desdemona's matter-of-fact response and by the military business at hand. But the strength of his passion makes him vulnerable to Iago's insinuations; having invested so much of himself in this woman — "My life upon her faith" — he is unraveled by the mere possibility of adultery. While Iago's machinations make Othello a more plausible character than the Captain, Shakespeare's Moor nevertheless shares the same pathology. Once jealous, he exclaims, "I will chop her into messes" (4.1.188). Only by destroying Desdemona can he quell the emotions that tear him apart.

Shakespeare's immediate source for *Othello* was Giraldi Cinthio who, unlike Knolles and Fenton, provided an outside instigator in the husband's jealousy. The first transformation from love to hate in Cinthio is his, for according to Bullough's translation, the Ensign began by falling "ardently in love with Disdemona." He then "bent all his thoughts to see if he could manage to enjoy her." When she did not respond to his overtures, "the love which he had felt for the Lady now changed to the bitterest hate." Like the two texts described above, excess of desire engenders the will to destroy. His anger flails outward; first it is directed at Disdemona, then at the Corporal (the Cassio figure), and finally at the Moor. Iago, in contrast, begins with hatred of the Moor, using Desdemona as a pawn. Thus in Shakespeare's text, Desdemona's death is a necessary by-product of Iago's hatred.

Cinthio also differs from Knolles and Fenton by characterizing the wife more fully than simply as the object of her husband's passions. When his Disdemona brings up the Corporal's reinstatement, she comments impetuously, "But you Moors are so hot by nature that any little thing moves you to anger and revenge." But as soon as these words are spoken, she backs off, terrified at her husband's reaction. She then humbly promises, "Only a very good purpose made me speak to you about this, but rather than have you angry with me I shall never say another word on the subject."⁴⁰ It is too late. Her husband asks the Ensign for ocular proof, sees the stolen handkerchief, and together they beat Disdemona to death with a sandfilled stocking.

Cinthio offered Shakespeare ample material for the temptation scene: the Ensign's insinuations about the Corporal, his manipulation of evidence, and his suggestion that Disdemona dislikes the Moor's

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), vol. VII, pp. 241-52.

blackness. What he did not provide is a deep portrait of the husband's pathology, the perturbations of the mind that lead him to believe such insinuations in the first place. So while Shakespeare relied on Cinthio for plot, he got the nuances of his characters elsewhere.

Another fascinating account of marital jealousy may have been available to Shakespeare during 1603 in manuscript form. Lady Elizabeth Cary's closet drama, *Marian*, was written between 1602 and 1604 though it remained unpublished until 1613. George W. Williams suggested that this play's portrayal of a "Judean queen" may have been the source of the Quarto's hotly-debated reference to a "base Judean."⁴¹ More important to my purposes than direct verbal parallels are the structural parallels to many of the situations and several speeches. In probing the pathology of male jealousy, Shakespeare may have turned not to Cinthio but to a play written by a woman.

Lady Cary's tragedy begins with Marian alone, torn between sorrow that her husband has died and relief that she will no longer suffer from his tyranny. She blames "Herods Jealousie" which "Had power euen constancie it selfe to change." Yet, she says, "too chaste a Scholler was my hart, / To learn to loue another then my Lord."⁴² Every character in the play, except perhaps Herod's manipulative sister Salome, fears his excessive rages. He had killed Marian's father and brother, and for love of her had divorced his wife Doris. He is perceived, in other words, as a man given to inexplicable perturbations of the mind. As his speeches in Act 4 demonstrate, when he thinks positively of Marian, he idealizes her into a creature more than human. When he suspects her, he sees her as the blackest devil imaginable. His mood swings are thereby symptomatic of his traditionally bifurcated view of the female Other as goddess or whore.

This double view is reinforced in *Marian* by the opposition between Marian and her sister-in-law Salome. While Marian's

⁴¹ George W. Williams, "Yet Another Early Use of Judean," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 34 (1983): 72. Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson also discuss this verbal parallel in *The Tragedy of Marston, the Fair Queen of Jacary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 42-43; unfortunately, this critical edition of Elizabeth Cary's play was published too recently to be cited here.

⁴² Elizabeth Cary [Cary], *The Tragedie of Marston, the Faire Queene of Jacary* (London: Printed by Thomas Creede for Richard Hawkins, 1613; repr. for the Malone Society, ed. A. C. Dunstan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944]). Quotations are from the Malone Society reprint and will be cited by line numbers within the text. The lines quoted here are 25-30.

chastity is never in doubt, Salome has had one husband killed before the play begins. During the play she divorces her second husband to marry a third. Constabarus, the second husband, warns his successor Silleus that "She meerly is a painted sepulcher, / That is both faire, and vniely foule at once." Though fair in outer graces,

Her mind is filld with worse then rotten bones

Her mouth though serpent-like it neuer hisses,
Yet like a Serpent, poysons where it kisses.

(880-89)

Marian, in contrast, is the "chast Queene." There is

neuer woman with so pure a heart,
Thine eyes graue maiesitie keeps all in awe,
And cuts the winges of euerie loose desire:
Thy brow is table to the modest lawe.

(1211-14)

Instead of providing a spectrum of female sexual mores, as Shakespeare does with Bianca the prostitute, Emilia the earthy matron, and Desdemona the chaste bride, Cary presents her major female characters as polar opposites.⁴³

Evil though she may be, Salome is compelling. She argues passionately in the first act that the Hebrew law that allows men to divorce wives they're tired of, but which denies this privilege to women, is unfair. In what may be an inspiration for Emilia's reflections on the double standard, Salome questions:

Why should such privilege to man be giuen?
Or giuen to them, why hard from women then?
Are men then we in grater grace with Heauen?
Or cannot women hate as well as men?

(315-18)

But Salome, unlike Emilia, is a villain. Marian claims in the previous scene that her sister-in-law had "vsde the art, / To slander haplesse *Marian* for vnchast" (265-66), and as the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Salome will commit any evil to get what she wants. Finally she succeeds in provoking Herod to kill his wife.

Salome's wickedness ought to highlight chaste Marian's virtue. Strangely enough, in this play written by a well-educated woman, the heroine's tragic flaw is her penchant for expressing her in-

⁴³ Graphina combines chastity with silence, but as a result, she speaks so few lines that she can hardly be called a major character.

dependent thoughts. In Act 3, when Herod unexpectedly returns alive from Egypt, Mariam forswears his bed. She knows that she could win him back with smiles and gentle words, but she opts instead for integrity, refusing to do what she does not feel. Salome predicts that "Vnbridled speech is *Mariams* worst disgrace, / And will indanger her without desert" (1186-87). Like Iago, Salome resolves to turn Mariam's "virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all" (*Othello*, 2.3.327-29). The Chorus agrees with Salome, pronouncing Mariam's doom in a strange conjunction of admiration and condemnation:

Tis not enough for one that is a wife
To keepe her spotles from an act of ill:
But from suspition she should free her life,
And bare her selfe of power as well as will.
Tis not so glorious for her to be free,
As by her proper selfe restrain'd to bee.

That wife her hand against her faine doth reare,
That more then to her Lord alone will giue
A priuate word to any second eare,
And though she may with reputation lue.
Yet though most chaste, she doth her glory blot,
And wounds her honour, though she kills it not.

Then she vsurpes vpon anothers right,
That seekes to be by publike language grac't:
And though her thoughts reflect with purest light,
Her mind if not peculiar is not chaste.
For in a wife it is no worse to finde,
A common body, then a common minde. (1219-48)

The Chorus, no doubt, would exalt the Stepford Wives as the ideal of womanhood. By its judgment, Mariam's determination to speak her thoughts condemns her. Or, as Herod puts it later in the play, "Her mouth will ope to eu'ry strangers eare" (1706). Mariam is thus a stronger version of Desdemona, whose outspoken pleas for Cassio are so easily misconstrued.

The similarities between Herod and Othello are also clear. Under Salome's insistence, the tyrant, like Othello, ponders the means to kill his wife. Whenever he thinks of her beauty, his heart softens. Like Othello, he sees "the pity of it" and dwells on his wife's virtues. When Salome suggests her treachery, Herod can only think of her death.

Finally, Herod resolves, "She shall not lue, nor will I see her face." Then he turns on Salome as Othello turns on Iago, "Hence from my sight" (1776-90).

After Mariam's death, Herod turns again. When he discovers that Mariam was innocent of Salome's accusations, he exclaims

I had but one inestimable Jewell,
Yet one I had no monarch had the like,

Twas broken by a blow my selfe did strike.
A pretious Mirrour made by wonderous art,
I priz'd it ten times dearer then my Crowne,
And laide it vp fast foulded in my heart:
Yet I in suddaine choler cast it downe.
And pash't it all to peeces.

She was my gracefull moytie, me accurst,
To slay my better halfe and saue my worst. (2061-76)

The parallels to Othello's final words are obvious. The Moor, like Herod, cast away a pearl richer than all his tribe, then his better half destroys his worsrer side by killing the Turk within. *Mariam* closes with Herod still alive, raving against Mariam's heavenly beauty that made him think "That it with chastite could neuer dwell" (2186).

Cary exposes in *Mariam* the contradictions in patriarchal conceptions of the female Other, but she does not condemn them. Mariam's beauty arouses Herod's passion, yet the excess of feeling he has for her is easily transformed to jealous rage. She could win his favor, temporarily at least, by being submissive. She chooses instead to be independent, and that decision guarantees her destruction.

In *Othello* Shakespeare manipulates the same contradictions; the more Desdemona pleads for Cassio, the more she insures her own death. Like Herod, Othello does not understand how his assumptions about women contribute to his tragedy, but unlike the Judean, he takes responsibility for his decision and executes the Turk within himself. And Emilia expresses what one wishes a character would say to Herod, "O gull! O dolt! / As ignorant as dirt!" (5.2.162-63)

Mariam allows no voice for such feelings. The result is a disconcerting disjunction between Mariam's role as virtuous heroine and the Chorus' condemnation of her.

As these texts demonstrate, narratives about the sudden onset of jealousy that results in violence against women appealed to Elizabethan

than and Jacobean authors and readers. Such stories might have had even greater appeal to dramatists, for scenes of jealous passion could titillate with fantasies of sexual activity without compromising the chaste heroine. Moreover, the enactment of the passions of the mind fully challenged a tragedian like Richard Burbage. Wright outlined how passions like jealousy could be represented. First, they appear in a man's speech. Too much or too little talk, slowness in speech, or rash, disconnected speech would reveal a perturbation of the mind. Thus it is a truism of *Othello* criticism that after the temptation scene arouses Othello's jealousy, his speech radically changes. He begins to speak in Iago's accents, using grotesque animal images. His speeches are no longer stately, but explosive and disjointed.

External actions could also reveal the workings of the inner soul. Wright cautioned his readers to examine "motions of the eyes, pronunciation, managing of the hands and bodie, [the] manner of going." Desdemona fears Othello, for example, when his eyes "roll so" (5.2.38). Wright would also have approved of the use of the handkerchief, for he claimed, "it ought seriously to be considered, that the presence of any visible object, moveth much more vehemently the passion, than the imagination or conceit thereof."⁴⁴

Othello's responses to Desdemona and to Iago can be seen as physical manifestations of a troubled mind. When he compares Desdemona to "The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up" (4.2.58-59), he echoes Wright: "the passion which is in our brest must be the fountaine and origen of all external actions."⁴⁵ That such passion leads to sudden changes in mood and turns his love to hate would not have surprised a Jacobean audience accustomed to such stories. Nor would it have been surprised that such passion was rooted in erotic desire and sexual jealousy, for in the narratives of Fenton and Cinthio, women were catalysts for male frenzy.

Note, too, that with the exception of the Albanoyse captain, the husbands described here are situated outside Christian culture: Ionuses is a Turkish sultan, Herod a Judean king. These husbands confirm Christian stereotypes about Turkish cruelty and Jewish tyranny. Like them, Othello is constructed in opposition to European culture, fulfilling the audience's expectations that a Moor will be violently jealous. In other words, while his behavior suits con-

temporary conceptions of male desire and susceptibility to passion, it is also imbricated in the discursive fields outlined in chapters 1 and 3. The contradictions in Othello's construction were inherent in contemporary debates about love, marriage, and the role of women.⁴⁶

As the "weaker vessel," Renaissance women were believed to be more passionate than men. If a husband could not control his wife, his other self, how could he control his own passions in the patriarchy of his own psyche? Or, to reverse the relationship between women and passion, where else should he vent his own uncontrollable erotic impulses if not on the woman, the representative of his weaker nature? The need to keep women silent, chaste, and obedient was thus the drive for order both without and within. Simply by serving as the object of a husband's desire, a woman could become the locus of disorder, of perturbations, of violence. The more she disturbed him, the more she had to be controlled. For Knolles' Bassa, Fenton's Captain, and Lady Cary's Herod, excess of love brings not just the desire to possess but the desire to destroy. Only with the woman's death do the disturbing passions cease.

The feminist critics discussed in the first section of this chapter have taught us to see Othello and Desdemona as constructed characters who are imbricated in contemporary conceptions of gender. Their analysis of *Othello* has provided valuable correctives to the male-dominated criticism of the mid-twentieth century and accorded Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca the attention they deserve. My discussion of narratives contemporary to *Othello* should be seen as a complement to their analyses and an antidote for the presentist impulse to see the play solely in post-Freudian terms.

Within that historical context, a Jacobean audience would have been less puzzled by Othello's transformation from doing husband to jealous murderer than we are. They would have expected Desdemona's love to be expressed in obedience and forgiveness. If the play surprised them at all, I suspect, it was by Emilia, a woman neither saint nor whore, who speaks against her husband's command to silence what might have been said of Knolles' Bassa, Fenton's Captain, and Cary's Herod: "O murderous coxcomb, what shouldst such a fool / Do with so good a wife?" (5.2.231-32)⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Cf. Valerie Wayne's Introduction to Tilney, *Finer of Friendship*, pp. 52-54.

⁴⁷ Here I admit to being among what Carol Thomas Neely describes as "the Emilia critics," for I see her as one of Shakespeare's most remarkable creations. See Neely, *Broken Myths*, p. 108.

⁴⁴ Wright, *Passions*, p. 158.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 174.