Marriage, the Violent Traverse from Two to One in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*

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A D. Nuttall once described Shakespeare's *Othello* as a play about "a hero who went into a house."[1] Such a description connoting domestic comfort sounds innocuous enough—but not according to early modern conceptions and representations of gender and violence. The early modern period evinces a greater distinction than our own between the male and the female conception of self. The Renaissance culture largely conceived the male self in terms (and ideals) of wholeness, completeness, autonomy, and self-sufficiency such that man's default state was a—much delusory—independent being, entailing a vexed pursuit to be "author of himself" (*Coriolanus*, 5.3.36).[2] In contrast, the female self—her sexual physiology seen as a receptacle, a concavity—was regarded in terms of incompleteness and nothingness. In the logic of early modern conceptions of gender, the woman was to achieve wholeness by linking herself—through marriage—with a male subject of wholeness. Indeed, according to common law, the legal personhood of marriage obtained solely in the man, and the woman, through coverture, became civilly dead.[3]

To explore the early modern experience of marriage in Shakespearean drama, I will juxtapose two plays rarely examined together: *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*. Unlike the romantic comedies, which deal with courtship and end in marriage, both *Taming*, an early comedy, and *Othello*, a mid-period tragedy, present glimpses into newlyweds undergoing the transition from the individual to the joint state of marriage. The two plays, moreover, dramatize the clash between the dominance model premised on male supremacy and the conscience model based on consensual, companionate marriage.[4] Herman von Wied's hortatory pamphlet, *The Glasse of Godly Love*, teaches that a wife should be submissive to the husband as the church is submissive unto Christ, quoting

Paul's teachings in Ephesians 5:22-23. The love between Christ and his congregation should be a model by which to attain the earthly paradise of marriage. Inversely, the husband, Paul enjoins, should treat his wife as he would himself and his body: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the assembly. . . . Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself" (Ephesians 5:25, 28). In von Wied's elaboration, the husband must show "most fervent love and affection, all gentle behavior, all faithfulness and help, all comfort and kindness, as to himself, his own flesh and body; so that under God there is no love, no affection, no friendship, no nearness of kin, to be compared unto this, nor any one thing under the Sun, that pleases God more than man and wife that agree well together, which live in the fear of God."[5] These opposing Biblical prescriptions entail models of parity and hierarchy simultaneously. This crucial contradiction within conjugal relations informs the difficult transumption of the marital two-in-one in *Taming* and *Othello* and undergirds the negotiations of equity and dominance within the gender relationship in these two plays. Marriage for the early moderns involved an existential anxiety far more perilous to personhood than what we today would call wedding jitters. On the husband's side, the marital dyad at worst posed a grave threat to male authority and at best his successful adjustment to a loving, working partnership. On the wife's side, marriage was a gamble resulting at worst in her loss of identity and at best in a mutually loving and respecting union defined by male headship.

In the broad generic scheme, the comedy *Taming* presents the auspicious outcome and *Othello*, its tragic opposite. However, Shakespeare's characteristic mixing of high and low, tragic and comic elements in his works underscores the conceptual affinity rather than the formal difference between the two plays based upon the "happy" or "tragic" ending. The frightening specter of marital violence lurking in *Taming*, as confirmed by the early modern records of battered women,[6] suggests that tragedy lies never afar (like John Keats's Melancholy ever attendant at the heels of Joy); conversely, the first two acts of *Othello* are broadly recognized as comedy before the onslaught of marital travails. What partly distinguishes the "happy" or "tragic" ending in the two plays is the role of external forces, be they human provocateurs (i.e., Iago) or impersonal winds of fortune or chance affecting the sequence of events. It is clear by act 3 that the protagonists of *Othello* are beset by a more hostile and malign world of human and circumstantial machination than the protagonists of *Taming*, where the whiffs of domestic debacle

are dispelled in an arena of comic play and play-acting, with their assurances of building and mending rather than destroying social bonds. This topic of external forces, however, lies outside the scope of this paper, which will focus rather on the action of the protagonists themselves and how they induce the comic or tragic ending. Specifically, I argue that while the comic couple of *Taming*, through prudence and moderation, successfully order their marriage toward virtuous ends, their tragic counterparts in *Othello*, through their unaccommodating virtue, fail to coordinate a dual life together.

This examination of good and effective action grounds itself in the early modern discourse of virtue and moderation. Fulke Greville, in 1609, voiced the era's concern over humanity's "wearisome" condition of "self-division"—"born under one law" of reason and bound to another of passion.[7] Observing affective instability in daily life—"lethargies, frenzies, melancholy, drunkenness, and such other passions,"[8] to use *Maister Spenser's* words—the early moderns came to regard the rational governance of unruly emotions as essential for the pursuit of self-knowledge and self-mastery, heeding the ancient Delphic injunctions of "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess." Regulating the passions through moderation became a primary focus of humanist virtue, whether in the context of Christian piety aimed for salvation or the ancient ideal of the good life—i.e., the full realization of the human potential.

Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, defines moderation as a disposition to choose the just mean between excess and deficiency in emotion and action as a response to varying circumstances and relative to each particular person. As a situational ethic, moderation can only be limned "in outline and not precisely,"[9] but that didn't stop the golden mean from becoming a powerful cultural commonplace in early modern England. Despite its ubiquitous invocation as an ideal, there was a great divergence in how this ethical principle was to be construed or applied to the various—economic, religious, social, erotic—spheres of early modern life.[10] Within this controversial discourse, Shakespeare distinguishes himself from many of his contemporaries, who pitted passion against moderation, excess against a "lukewarm" mean (which novelist George Eliot three centuries later exemplified in Casaubon, the mediocre scholar, moldering away in "middle march"). Given his complexity of thought, Shakespeare, throughout his corpus, presents diverse representations of moderation, reflective of various contemporary views: e.g., self-restraint with regard to common pleasures, discipline in politics, virtuosity in self-

advancement, and feminine modesty. Among Shakespeare's various depictions of the mean, however, none, I argue, is as innovative and potent as virtuous moderation, deploying rather than decrying passion towards salutary and excellent ends. In *Taming* and *Othello*, as in so much of his canon, Shakespeare vividly dramatizes a conception of moderation faithful to the Aristotelian conception of the mean as a situational virtue, which encompasses powerful passions and actions.

The Taming of the Shrew opens up the ethical issues involving the passions, virtue, and moderation when young Lucentio's plan to "study, / Virtue and that part of philosophy / . . . that treats of happiness / By virtue specially to be achieved" (1.1.18-20) gets diverted by love in a conventional opposition of love and philosophy. Virtue, however, is the key guiding force in Petruchio's wooing and socializing of Kate. Contrary to the standard critical view, Petruchio's extreme means of taming constitutes virtuous moderation, according to Aristotle, the ability to implement the just mean of affect and action in a given situation.[11] His ranting is not uncontrolled anger, but skillful, controlled acting deployed towards the virtuous end: Kate emerging from behind her shield of shrew. Moderation is a virtuous extreme in value and an instrumental mean in practice, involving the entire range of extraordinary and moderate passion and action: an excellence of disciplined passion. Moderation not only regards pains, pleasures, and the physical appetites, but is also a mean in all actions, aimed for the well-ordered soul. As Aristotle suggests, even discerning the target in real life is much more complex than in archery in that the just mean is a moving target—not a simple arithmetic mean—varying by person, by circumstance, by emotion. The complexity redoubles as we see the taming working both ways: Petruchio and Kate, in their mutual taming of each other, skillfully modulate rhetoric and theatrics towards the aim of domestic flourishing. Crucial within this enactment of virtuous moderation is prudence, the Latinate humanist version of Aristotelian practical wisdom: the perfected ability to secure the best ends in life by forwarding the just affect and action as the situation demands. The first section of this essay demonstrates how the comic couple of *Taming*, through virtuous moderation, prudentially marshals their marriage toward salubrious ends.

The second and third sections of this study then examine how the tragic couple in *Othello*, through their inflexible "hypervirtue," fail to coordinate conjugal companionship. As the original meaning of *hamartia* suggests, they sorely miss the mark of integrating Mars

and Venus into a harmonious and fruitful union. *Othello* is not simply the story of "an easily inflamed man who has the unfortunate accident of meeting an Iago."[12] The seeds of disaster are sown in the characters of Othello and Desdemona themselves: as Heraclitus once noted, "Man's character is his fate [*daimôn*]."[13] In other words, one's own character, not the stars above, determines one's fortune or misfortune, *eudaimonia* or *dusdaimonia*. In the case of our tragic couple, they create *dusdaimonia* out of their marriage, Othello inexorably enacting upon Desdemona the disaster of his marital state and the violent literalization of the male headship in the smothering of his wife. Ironically, it is their very passion for virtue that induces their ruin. Contrary to the common focus of criticism, it is sameness rather difference that brings on the debacle. What I call "hypervirtue" on both sides ironically alienates the couple from each other.

Although both Othello and Desdemona are dedicated to the maintenance of Othello's "perfect soul" (1.2.31), the virtuous foundation of their two-in-one, this shared devotion ruthlessly isolates one from the other without the temporizing effects of human sympathy. Despite the "pity" (1.3.167, 4.1.186-87) that binds them in piercing and wistful admiration of the good, they cannot enact pity towards each other, immured in the chrysolite prisons of their "perfect souls." The analysis of good and effective action undoubtedly favors the comic protagonists because virtuous moderation is more generously dispensed among its protagonists to achieve happy outcomes, whereas tragedy depicts its protagonists descending towards disaster through character flaws and errors. The focus of comedy and tragedy diverge in this regard. While we can admire the well-wrought actions leading to a sometime stronger and sometime weaker vision of harmony and order in Shakespearean comedy, his tragedies particularly endow the theatrical performance with all the emotional intensity of the lived experience. Tragedy calls to mind what is more important than the mere success or failure in the power dynamics of gender: the movingly human, phenomenological experience of early modern and modern subject-spouses trying to achieve a working love through what Harry Berger calls "the discipline of tempered communion."[14]

Petruchio's moderation operates within the classical connection between virtue and knowledge, or wisdom. As Lodowick Bryskett, author of *A Discourse of Civill Life*, affirms, the man of moderation "knoweth that he is not born to himself alone, but to civil society and conversation, and to the good of others as well as of himself."[15]

Petruchio sees beneath Kate's defensive shield of a sharp tongue into her true worth, and taming, transcending its offensiveness to modern sensibilities, is the process to unveil her hidden virtue. Indeed, Petruchio is Kate's champion before a "sland'rous world" that sees her crookedly "limp[ing]" when, indeed, "Kate like the hazel-twig / Is straight and slender, and as brown in hue /As hazelnuts and sweeter than the kernels" (2.1.245-48), descriptions of more credible, homely beauty than the clichéd Petrarchan tropes by which Lucentio woos Bianca. In this manner, Petruchio tries to undo her generally "ill-favoured" status, promulgated by her father Baptista's preference for gentle-seeming Bianca of "beauteous modesty" (2.1.251). At the end of their famous verbal duel, he claims emphatically, "I am he am born to tame you, Kate, / And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate / Conformable as other household Kates" (2.1.263-70). Not only does he resonantly reiterate her name, he claims the singularity of their union—"Thou must be married to no man but me" (2.1.267)—in this way, approaching love's ideal of finding "that special face" (2.1.11), something the other pair of youthful lovers, Bianca and Lucentio, have only incompletely found in each other.

Whereas feminist critics have generally resisted Petruchio's taming tactics as akin to modern methods of torture and brainwashing,[16] this essay situates itself in the "pro-Petruchio" camp, extending a humanist reading of his extremist methods of socializing Kate.[17] Petruchio employs extraordinary, prudential means to channel Kate's anti-social violence into productive passion, the so-called taming of Kate. First, Petruchio takes her away from her social circle immediately after the wedding. This action, which the feminist camp interprets as an act of cruelty, becomes, in this prudential humanist reading, a salutary action of distancing Kate from the source of harm, a familial and social circle inimical to her being. Second, Petruchio employs his command of theatrics and rhetoric to teach Kate a fundamental lesson about living in society: the need to play social roles. This is hardly a new idea—what is important here rather is that Petruchio is adept at finding the just mean between conforming with and opposing the concerns and conventions of his society as the situation demands. For instance, just as he eschews Petrarchan ideals for a more homely conception of beauty, Petruchio scorns outward garments for inner virtue with dramatic verve. Unlike many other Shakespearean characters, he exudes an assurance regarding himself and his place and power within society. It is with this assurance that he creates and re-creates himself through

theatrics and rhetoric towards profitable and virtuous ends. Thus to bring Kate around, Petruchio modulates his actions effectively between hyperbolic rant and gentle speech entailing the same governance of passions practiced by skilled early modern actors, or "prudent mediocritie," according to Thomas Wright.[18]

The marital battle of the sexes comes to a head during the "sun and moon" dispute, which has boiled down to who can put up the bigger fuss and win the title of petty tyrant. The sheer absurdity of his presumption to preside over celestial motions allows Kate to bow down without losing dignity and, more importantly, the understanding that play-acting can be used for constructive social ends. By seeing her shrewishness mirrored through Petruchio's tyrannical ways, Kate comes to realize that Petruchio, beyond his roaring façade, is her ally, friend, and husband, who not only sees and appreciates her worth but wants her to do the same. No longer needing a combative front against an inimical world, she has regained herself. And in her newfound self-possession without the bugbears of male detractors, Kate has also regained a world—over which she will morally preside, trumping Petruchio's formal husbandly authority.

Her famous final speech, ostensibly addressing proper female conduct with "Fie, fie, unknit that threatening unkind brow" (5.2.140), subtly echoes Petruchio's bravura speech on male virtue concluding with "Tush, tush, fear boys with bugs" (1.2.205) and, likewise, reveals her self-command and control of the immediate scene. Despite her external aim to rein in deviant female behavior and her apparent accommodation of distinct gender expectations, Kate subtly gives equal time to proper male conduct, thereby commixing the complementary male and female virtue into a "heavenly mingle" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.1.58) of human excellence. In her hortatory speech to the other wives, Kate not only extols the ideal husband but also cunningly enumerates his contractual duties, the default of which would relinquish her from his authority:

> Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
> Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,
> And for thy maintenance commits his body
> To painful labour both by sea and land,
> To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
> Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;
> And craves no other tribute at thy hands
> But love, fair looks, and true obedience—
> Too little payment for so great a debt. (5.2.150-58)

This speech recapitulates the Pauline injunction of husbandly duty towards the wife, which von Wied presents in *The Glasse of Godly Love* as a pre-eminent model of imitation to which all husbands are accountable. As Henry Smith explains in his conduct manual, "A Preparation to Marriage" (1594), "if [the husband] let [his wife] be better than himself, he seems to free her from her obedience, and bind himself to obey her."[19] Kate's exaggerated compliance with conduct-book female submissiveness, moreover, reveals its apocryphal nature, undermining the argument of physical strength as rationale for superiority and exposing the defects of natural law and the arbitrariness of positive law as based upon "custome, education, fortune, and a certayne tyrannicall occasion."[20] In performance, Kate's ending gesture of placing her hands "below [her] husband's foot" (5.2.177), if enacted as seizing his Achilles's heel, could be emphatically ambivalent, signalling both her wifely obeisance and her queenly checkmating of Petruchio through his *de facto* moral inferiority despite his *de juris* superiority. Bianca's self-assertive retort to Lucentio's complaint about losing the bet, "The more fool you for laying on my duty" (5.2.128), thereby correcting his view of her as either Petrarchan lady during courtship or submissive wife during marriage, also reinforces the satiric undertone of Kate's final speech. While Bianca rightly checks Lucentio's objectifying conception of women, Kate goes further constructively to model before her audience virtuous moderation as an effective art of living: a Platonic fusion of love and the good producing salutary ends in the world through Aristotelian practical wisdom. And that is how Kate domestiKates Petruchio and the others in the moral *oikonomia* of Padua.

Othello allows greater expression of heroic virtue through the characters of Othello and Desdemona while at the same time reducing the prudential action linked with comedy for the workings of *hamartia*, the character flaw and/or error(s) of judgment which yield (Aristotelian) tragedy. While most scholarship on Othello and Desdemona have focused on differences between them—sex, race, and age—my reading highlights sameness in Othello's and Desdemona's unaccommodating virtue as the root of their demise. The play's wondrous effect lies in this marvelous union of differences that transpires against all perceivable obstacles. Othello and Desdemona's extraordinary relationship, depicting the magic and misery, the enchantment and torment issuing from erotic desire as a so-called "attraction of opposites," explores to what extent difference enhances an amorous relationship and at what point it can prove deleterious. By generic imperative, the tragedy examines

both the internal and external, the characteral and cultural conditions by which Othello and Desdemona's marriage works its way to doom. In the interests of space, I will focus on the characteral, and hence, the prudential causes of their tragedy.

Despite their external differences in skin color, age, and social class, Othello and Desdemona are alike in one respect: both are, in the eyes of others, exemplars of virtue and self-dignity—he, through his martial prowess and commanding ability that constitute masculine virtue, and she, through maidenly chastity and social grace that constitute feminine virtue. At the same time, Othello, by virtue of his color, and Desdemona, by virtue of her sex, are both, in Robert Watson's words, "romantic innocents in a world of sexual intrigue."[21] Despite this marital breach triggered by the devious Iago, the cause of tragedy lies not so much in difference as in sameness: Othello's and Desdemona's hypervirtue—failure on both sides to temporize their idealism so as to bridge emerging conflicts instead of aggravating them. Despite their extraordinary union, Othello and Desdemona, as spouses, fail to modulate the demands of individual being with those of the joint marital being.

In the first half of the play, Othello displays a liberal nature that approves the sensual side of virtue and promotes the flourishing of beauty and love through pleasure:

> 'Tis not to make me jealous
> To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
> Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances;
> Where virtue is, these are more virtuous. (3.3.183-86)

Here, his *love* of Desdemona gives her *leave* (linguistic cognates[22]) to be the gracious, virtuous lady of the house. His liberality gives her liberty to display the social graces of civilized life.

Yet the world of civil and conjugal domesticity has also a disturbing erotic side, which begins to unman Othello. To Desdemona's departing words in act 3, scene 3, "Be as your fancies teach you. / Whate'er you be, I am obedient" (89-90), Othello exclaims in self-reflection, "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee, and when I love thee not, / chaos is come again" (91-94). Though Othello is referring to Desdemona, the epithet equally suits himself in the penumbra of marital dyad: caught between perdition and chaos, between loving and not loving, in a new, confounding world in which his sense of self hangs on his beloved's regard. When Othello rejoins Desdemona in Cyprus, having weathered a terrible storm, he exclaims, "If it were now to die / 'Twere now to be most happy" (2.1.186-87). Granted that

this is Othello's expression of his happiness at seeing Desdemona, conveying the perfection of the moment, one cannot help wondering what man would be content with death before the consummation of their marriage! Othello speaks of the perdition of loving and the chaos of not loving, but in his rapid decline from non-jealousy to a demand of "proof" in the same passage (3.3.195), Othello flees his own turmoil rather than save love.

Troubled in both the racial and sexual aspects of his being, Othello acts consistently to defend his manhood over his marriage, his personal interests over those of the joint being. Despite his cry of despair at the loss of love, he is more consumed by the loss of his mental peace. His anguish is so great that he buys this peace at the cost of bewhoring Desdemona. Sexual and racial insecurity assailing the core of his self-worth, Othello is not capable of love defined as emotional and psychic unity such that selfless devotion towards the beloved's well-being is equivalent with one's own well-being. For Othello, Desdemona remains an object to be enjoyed, appreciated, and used for male profit, not a subject in her own right, whose feelings and actions he respects and bewonders as those of a distinct individual. Consequently, Othello makes professions of justice regarding her alleged adultery, but shortly thereafter denies her the due process entitled to the accused. The judicious deliberation of "I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove" (3.3.194) is followed a mere 170 lines later by the violent exhortation, "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore. . . . Give me the ocular proof" (3.3.364-65). It is Othello, who seems to have a change of heart—not Desdemona, as Iago insinuates: he wants back his "unhousèd free condition" (1.2.26). The gloriously active warrior would rather front the most harrowing dangers of nature and martial violence than the unbearable storminess of eros. That is why Othello easily accepts a combination of indirect and unreliable evidence—the circumstantial evidence of the handkerchief, pseudo-auditory proof, and various accounts of hearsay—the totality of which offers him an illusion of sufficient proof. Our students often ask in frustration, "Why doesn't Othello confront Desdemona directly about Cassio and give her a chance to speak?" But that is a moot point. In his psychic distress, he simply wants out—at the cost of bewhoring and expunging Desdemona. In his state of male insecurity, her speech could only incriminate her as *prima facie* evidence of promiscuity. Othello has cleverly maneuvered between the "perdition" of loving—the threat against his self-integrity—and the "chaos" of not loving—the void it leaves—towards a

falsely just mean: the self-justified peace of not loving Desdemona by virtue of her "proven" guilt.

Although Othello and Desdemona's marriage begins with all the promises of an edenic union, Othello quits paradise, his mind filled with foul thoughts, the reflection of his own fallen state, his alliance with the Satan-like Iago. The clash arises when Desdemona's generosity, linked to self-expansion, swells to the edge of feminine grace, which turns into wayward wantonness in the eyes of insecure Othello, his jealousy piqued by Iago's pernicious prodding. In their joint being, Othello takes an insinuation of Desdemona's adultery as an actual assault upon his "pure soul" such that in the most visceral terms, he "had rather be a toad, / And live upon the vapour of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses" (3.3.274-7).

The couple's marriage devolves abruptly from the companionate to the dominance model as signaled by Othello's retraction of liberality in act 3, scene 4. The once rational and judicious Othello now practices superstitious hand-reading, interpreting her moist hand not auspiciously, but suspiciously, as a sign of sexual promiscuity, "fruitfulness and *liberal* heart" (3.4.36, my italics). The word *liberal* has assumed an insidiousness even as license has cankered to licentiousness in Othello's post-lapsarian view. In this, his first encounter with Desdemona after Iago's pernicious impact, Othello cannot perceive the true devil and already demonizes his innocent wife in a riddling manner: "For here's a young and sweating devil here / That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good, / A frank one" (3.4.40-42). Choosing to speak to Desdemona in a mystifying manner, Othello, even as he prematurely decides her guilt, prevents open communication with her, further shutting down her opportunities to defend herself. In this act of foreclosure, he subconsciously, yet insidiously, sends the "frank" Desdemona to Cassio, to "intermingle" ardently in his suit—not in lewdness, but out of boredom, for the "young and sweating devil here / That commonly rebels" is the woman idling away in domestic inconsequence, suddenly impassioned by an opportunity for grave action outside the home.

Othello's claim to "love not wisely but too well" (5.2.353) better suits Desdemona, consecrating herself absolutely to her husband's "soul and [mis]fortunes" (1.3.249). If Othello's normative actions represent the early modern man's first and foremost devotion to his inviolate self, Desdemona embodies the early modern wife's sense of self as embedded, for better or worse, in the joint being of marriage. Desdemona's accompanying Othello to Cyprus as

his "fair warrior" (2.1.179) seems to signal a happy union of Mars and Venus: Othello partakes in the social and domestic joys while Desdemona lives closer to the masculine, military life than what early modern women were generally allowed. In act 1, we sympathize with Desdemona's insistence on accompanying her husband to Cyprus and her complementary reluctance to stay behind in the vicinity of her disapproving father when her new devotion by marriage is to Othello. At first Desdemona's presence at Othello's side in Cyprus promises the harmonious mythical union of Mars and Venus, but the events of the play reveal, instead, that military and domestic actions do not mix auspiciously as Othello's expeditious martial adjudication of his domestic trouble clearly reveals. Given her open, solicitous nature ("liberal heart" [3.4.36]) and the murky boundaries between the martial and the social realms, it is hard to condemn the sympathetic motives behind her incursions into the military sphere. Nonetheless, Desdemona, immured in the ethos of "perfect souls," does not navigate well the sudden traverse from the companionate to the dominance model as her feminine grace soils in Othello's eyes into wayward wantonness.

Desdemona comes to tragedy by mistakenly pursuing virtue as an unqualified extreme, instead of modulating it according to the political imperatives bearing upon all human action. Her own impeccable honor, bound with her unassailable idealization of Othello, "keeps her from acknowledging his jealousy while pursuing a course of rhetorical action that aggravates it."[23] Desdemona engages "frankly" with Cassio, wholly out of touch with the emotional reality of her husband's jealousy. Desdemona's perception of his insecurity should alert her to mitigate her ardent suit in Cassio's behalf. Nonetheless, she does not make allowances for moral weakness and instead expects Othello to conduct himself as magnanimously as she does.

Given Cassio's misconduct in the drunken brawl (at Iago's insidious instigation), Othello's suspension of the lieutenant was a reasonable decision, which Desdemona, the very next day, tries to override with no regard in this instance for the rehabilitative effect of disciplinary action. In her conversation with Cassio, who is afraid of losing his position permanently, Desdemona rightly reassures him that Othello "shall in strangeness stand no farther off / Than in a politic distance" (3.3.12-13). Upon the entrance of Othello and Iago, Cassio himself enacts a "politic distance" and dismisses himself, "Madam, not now," in deference for penitential time. On the contrary, Desdemona contradicts her own words and solicits an immediate reinstatement of Cassio with no

regard for "politic distance." In her excess of pity (from which Othello himself previously benefited), she implores with pathos,

> *Othello:* Went he hence now?
> *Desdemona:* Yes, faith, so humbled
> That he hath left part of his grief with me
> To suffer with him. Good love, call him back.
> (3.3.52-55)

Not surprisingly, Othello repeats Cassio's very words: "Not now, sweet Desdemon. Some other time" (3.3.56). This verbal accord suggests two points: first, the two men will sort their difference out in due time and in good measure, and, second, Desdemona's affect-based meddling is not only unnecessary, but harmful to the natural course of repairing the martial, homosocial relationship. Yet Desdemona, veritably in the role of the "young and sweating devil . . . / That *commonly* rebels" (3.4.40-41, my italics), perversely forces the issue:

> *Desdemona:* But shall't be shortly?
> *Othello:* The sooner, sweet, for you.
> *Desdemona:* Shall't be tonight at supper?
> *Othello:* No, not tonight.
> *Desdemona:* Tomorrow dinner, then?
> *Othello:* I shall not dine at home.
> I meet the captains at the citadel. (3.3.57-60)

Blinkered, Desdemona does not infer from this last remark that the resolution regarding Cassio's dereliction of duty resides in a tougher, masculine form of interaction of the martial realm rather than the more affective, feminine form of interaction of the domestic realm. For a woman of reputed virtue, Desdemona displays an uncommon immoderation and a most common impatience. Still unrelenting, she then *demands* that Othello and Cassio reconcile within three days, giving as arguments the harshness of the punishment and Othello's personal debt to Cassio, who served as the loyal intercessor during their courtship. Her reasons, however, are not militarily sound. First, Cassio's participation in a drunken brawl resulting in the wounding of a man greatly exceeds what erroneously she undercuts "in our common reason [as] not almost a fault / T'incur a private check" (3.3.65-68). Second, as Cassio would well understand, Othello, in his duty as governor, must set aside all personal claims in the disciplining of his lieutenant. Desdemona's reasoning is common in two ways: she applies (common) civic procedure when military procedure is in order, and, furthermore, exhibits mediocre instead

of sound judgment—with the final implication that her reputed virtue refers more to traditional female chastity and fidelity than the practical wisdom required by virtuous moderation, or disciplined passion.

Yet Desdemona continues to flex her "grace or power" (3.3.46), even to the point of threatening consequences if Othello does not comply: "By'r Lady, I could do much" (3.3.75). She is the one guilty of having "so much to-do / With bringing [Cassio] in" (3.3.74-75), not Othello whom she accuses. Deeply attached to her, Othello indulgently grants her wish: "Prithee, no more. Let him come when he will. / I will deny thee nothing" (3.3.76-77). By any reasonable measure, Desdemona should be satisfied with Othello's answer, yet she is not, exclaiming, "Why, this is not a boon" (3.3.77), and rants about this denouement. To Desdemona, who has turned this event into a big issue involving her female agency, Othello's granting her a general blessing has the effect of belittling what, from her perspective of limited female agency, is weighty matter, "full of poise" into a domestic trifle such as entreating "you [to] wear your gloves, / . . . Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit / To your own person" (3.3.77-81). Ironically, Desdemona's speech has the curious effect of betraying her own psychic process as she, lacking "poise," uses Cassio's suit to gain "a peculiar profit / To [her] own person." Subsumed by marriage in Othello's gloriously active life, Desdemona is not content merely to listen vicariously about his adventures in the drawing room, but rather to engage actively in them herself.

Despite Emilia's remark, "Is this man not jealous?" (3.4.96), representing the commentary of the rational (wo)man, Desdemona, willfully involving herself in martial affairs as Othello's "fair warrior" (2.1.179), believes that "state matters" (3.4.151) of Venice are the cause of Othello's distemper.[24] Desdemona herself admits, however, that she has gone too far in promoting the interests of friendship over the interests of marital harmony. Instead of trying to temporize with shortcomings of other morally flawed beings, Desdemona focuses self-absorbedly on her penitence:

> Beshrew me much, Emilia,
> I was—unhandsome warrior as I am—
> Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;
> But now I find I had suborned the witness,
> And he's indicted falsely. (3.4.146-49)

If only for a moment, Desdemona regrets this recent rebellion of her soul, which she had joined eternally with Othello's. In her contrition, however, she is more focused on upholding her integrity than examining how her "frank" behavior might be aggravating his sense of insecurity and how she might change her course of conduct. Even her statement, "Nay, we must think men are not gods, / Nor of them look for such observancy / As fits the bridal" (3.4.144-46), is more a generalized observation about the gap between martial and marital spheres than an empathetic understanding of what her exceeding kindness has wrought in her sexually insecure husband. Desdemona's assurance of love, "'twas that [frank] hand that gave away my heart" (3.4.43), would have satisfied the former Othello, appeased by the thought that "she had eyes and she chose me" (3.3.193), but not the jealous Othello, whom she ignores through her narrow, solipsistic lens of hypervirtue. Moreover, simply exculpating herself as the cause of Othello's jealousy ("Alas the day, I never gave him cause" [3.4.153]) does nothing to confront the problem in real terms, which, as Emilia well understands, is a condition *independent* of cause, a disease within Othello's mind. An image of high expectation of conduct and achievement often becomes the impetus for a person to fulfill that image. But such is not the right strategy to deal with Othello in his pathological state. Desdemona's blinkered focus on her personal integrity prevents any practical handling of Othello's problem.

Thus, despite her confession to wrongdoing, Desdemona again, instead of following her own good counsel, continues to badger Othello about Cassio, this time in public. In her single-minded pursuit of reconciliation between Othello and Cassio, Desdemona shows an odd combination of cleverness and obtuseness. Not the "subtle whore" Othello thinks her to be, she resorts to cunning tactics of social pressure to mend bonds in the broadest sense of the venereal enterprise. Yet she does not modulate her virtuous project with the realities of interacting with fallible human beings. Thus her explanation to Lodovico about the "unkind breach" (4.1.218), trying to enlist him to her cause, is most "unpleasing to a married ear" (*Love's Labour Lost*, 5.2.877): "I would do much / T'atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio" (4.1.224-25). When Othello, astounded—"Fire and brimstone!" (4.1.226)—by her temerity, cautions Desdemona, "Are you wise?" (4.1.225), she obtusely continues to press the issue further. When "state matters" call him back to Venice, "deputing Cassio in his government" (4.1.229), in Othello's heated brain, Fortune and

Desdemona, the "subtle whore," might just as well be conspiring to bring him down. Desdemona, seeing his anger, only spurs him further, "By my troth, I am glad on't" (4.1.230), committing in Othello's mind, the ultimate act of madness justifying his slapping her face in public. Desdemona's utter disregard of Othello's jealousy seriously undermines her protestations of virtue: "Sweet Othello . . . I have not deserved this" (234-35). Technically, no, she does not deserve the public reprimand because she is innocent on the count of infidelity, but on account of angering her husband by refusing to perceive the jealousy roused within him, only the blind, hypervirtuous Desdemona would insist after this scene of provocation that she "never gave him cause" (3.4.153).

The gap between Desdemona's and Othello's views can further be explained by the fact that the wifely prerogative of free speech in their initially consensual, companionate marriage has by the effect of male insecurity regressed to the patriarchal injunctions of feminine silence, obedience, and chastity. According to this restrictive standard, Desdemona's open speech is in and of itself an expression of promiscuity.[25] Despite Lodovico's defense of her as "truly, an obedient lady" (4.1.243), there is room for doubt even within the context of a consensual, companionate marriage. An obedient wife in such a marriage would not act in bad faith by pursuing a double-faced strategy of calling him "sweet Othello," even as she intentionally provokes him to anger. Her gladness in Othello's return to Venice is, moreover, inconsistent with her initial insistence on accompanying her husband to Cyprus.

The challenge that presents itself for the early modern virago, a woman aspiring for greater agency, is the difficulty of balancing feminine obedience and masculine self-assertion towards best effects. Sympathizing with her passion for greater agency, we also witness how Desdemona botches her attempts at just action, unsuccessfully intermingling masculine and feminine modes of conduct in the intermediate space of Cyprus between the martial and the venereal. Ineffectively pleading Cassio's suit in a feminine, affective mode of action with masculine self-assertion, Desdemona fails to bridge the gap between the two spheres, reflective of her fractured being, and ultimately yields to female subsumption within the male being, a negation physically enacted by her death at Othello's hands.

In *Taming*, we revel at the successful prudential action of Kate and Petruchio, crowned with the happy end of sexual consummation: "Come, Kate, we'll to bed" (5.2.188). In *Othello*, Desdemona weds death, her sexuality tamed in chrysolite. Her

retreat to the marital bed, as heralded by the "Willow" song about forsaken love, underscores her "embeddedness" in the marital union to the loss of her life. The smothering of Desdemona in her marital sheets, in all its quiet horror, becomes the literal enactment of the coverture of the wife in the legal personhood of the man. As the other comedies featuring jealous men—*Much Ado*, *Merry Wives*, and *The Winter's Tale*—suggest, Kate could well have a darker future than hinted by the play's jocular end. Despite its generic happy ending, trouble lurks in *The Taming of the Shrew* as well as we can imagine gender and subject negotiations continuing after the curtain's close as they do in real life. A juxtaposed reading of *Taming* and *Othello* mutually informs the gender dynamics of the marital dyad in both plays.

Examining a comic and tragic portrayal of the erotic and political negotiations within marriage reveals the trade-off between prudential success and emotional intensity that Shakespeare himself negotiates in deciding between the comic or tragic mode, or as he often does, mixing the two to present a "mingled yarn" (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 4.3.69). Within the context of early modern matrimonial discourses, we see, with Othello's transformation from a calm, judicious commander into a zealous murderer, a devolution of the couple's marriage from the conscience model based on companionate marriage to the dominance model based on male supremacy and the famous triple injunction for wifely submission: silence, obedience, and chastity. The interpretation of Shakespeare's characteristically multi-faceted tragedy cannot be rigidly bound by this topical model, however; the play's literary greatness allows us to experience the moral struggle and the genuine terror of Othello's dilemma. A character's actions read in the context of his own—however delusive—moral aspirations, Othello's murder of Desdemona is the literalization of death-of-spouse dreams on the part of early moderns, for whom marriage was forever and divorce was not an option.[26] Given his visceral perception of being bound to the carcass of his vicious spouse, the only way that Othello can retrieve his "perfect soul" is to cut her off.

Similarly, in Desdemona's case, the challenge for the modern reader is to see her other than a female abject: to grant her tragic stature despite her seeming role of feminine passivity. In my estimation, Desdemona is a tragic hero (not heroine) in two respects: her noble spirit combined with her tragic prudential errors. In her controversial last words, she asserts her innocence as the core of her being: "A guiltless death I die" (5.2.132). When Emilia asks, "Who hath done this deed?" Desdemona replies enigmatically,

"Nobody—I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!" (5.2.121-24). Desdemona's paradoxical last words do not simply enact the wifely abject, but more subtly, the integrity of a woman who, with no other recourse, submitted herself nobly to the two-in-one. Othello's and Desdemona's failures in prudential action must be sympathetically seen within a relentless concatenation of untimely events, coincidences, and mutable human interaction, which make good action all the more challenging. Likewise, with less acuteness, we may also access Kate's phenomenological situation of a strong-minded early modern woman, spurned by the men of her society, who feel challenged by her wit and tongue. In Petruchio, we have one man unafraid to front the strong woman, who, in the process, might become a better man by replacing his machismo with true magnanimity and strength. Ultimately, it is not so much the gender/genre outcome—comic or tragic depending on successful prudential action—that reverberates in us long after the curtain's close, but rather the whole of the dramatic representation as phenomenological glimpses into early modern marriage, conveying the challenges, complexities, and joys that accompany the pursuit of good action in real life.

Notes

1. A. D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Realilty* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1983), 134.

2. Citations of Shakespeare are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997). I would like to thank Nancy Barta-Smith for her useful comments about the organization of this paper.

3. Meg Lota Brown and Kari Boyd McBride, *Women's Roles in the Renaissance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 54.

4. Sara Munson Deats, "'Truly an Obedient Lady': Desdemona, Enilia, and the Doctrine of Obedience in *Othello*," *Othello: New Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Kolin (New York: Routledge, 2002), 233-34.

5. Hermann von Wied, *The Glasse of Godly Love, A Briefe and a Plaine Declaration of the Duety of Maried Folks*, trans. Haunce Dekin (London: I. C[harlewood] for H. S[ingleton], 1588), sig. Bi.

6. Although husbands were encouraged to use peaceful means to inculcate their wives in these hortatory treatises, wife-beating was, nonetheless, a legal means of "correction." In the case of a wife in danger of having "her brains knocked out," William Whateley, author of *A Bride Bush* (William Whately, *A Bride Bush or A Direction for Married Persons* [London, 1623], sig. Ee3 v), generally sympathetic to women, explains that she may take recourse of the law for safety "with the purpose of returning upon such security."

7. Fulke Greville, "Mustapha," in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams, 5th ed., 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986), 1:990.

8. Lodowick Bryskett, *A Discourse of Civill Life (1606)*, ed. Thomas E. Wright (Northridge: San Fernando Valley State College, 1970), 202.

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, from *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, 1947), 2.2.1104a108.

10. Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3.

11. Aristotle, 2.6.1106a28.

12. Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1964), 38; see also A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 278, on Othello's victimization by Iago based on the textual clue in Othello's final speech: "but being wrought/ Perplexed in the extreme" (5.2.354-55).

13. Heraclitus, Fragment 119, *The Complete Fragments: Translation and Commentary and the Greek Text*, trans. William Harris, 31-32, http://www.community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/heraclitus.pdf (4 April 2006).

14. Harry Berger, Jr., *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 22.

15. Bryskett, *A Discourse of Civill Life*, 154. In ancient Greek philosophy, wisdom is the knowledge of marshaling goods, such as health, wealth, social status, and moral virtues, towards a chief good of happiness, or self-flourishing. Socrates believed that true wisdom was equivalent to virtue (no issue of weak will), and that virtue was sufficient for happiness.

16. Jean Howard, introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 139.

17. Dana E. Aspinall, ed., introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13-14.

18. Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall (1604)*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 179.

19. Henry Smith, "A Preparation to Marriage," in *The Sermons of Master Henry Smith* (London: Thomas Man, 1594), 21.

20. Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De nobilitate et praecellentia sexus foeminei (1509) (Female Pre-eminence, or The Dignity and Excellency of That Sex above the Male, an Ingenious Discourse)*, trans. Henry Care (London: 1670), sig. F7.

21. Robert N. Watson, "Tragedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 330; Michael Neill, "Changing Places in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Survey* 37 (1984): 118.

22. See etymological explanation for OED entry, "leave, n.1": "The etymological sense is prob. 'pleasure, approval'; the root is identical with that of LOVE, LIEF, BELIEVE."

23. Harry Berger, Jr., "'Three's a Company': The Spectre of Contaminated Intimacy in *Othello*," *Shakespearean International Yearbook* 4 (2004): 257, pun intended.

24. See Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 60-64, for an excellent psycho-physiological explanation of Othello's "puddle" spirit.

25. See Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 118, quoting Juan Luis Vives, *Instruction of a Christen Woman* (1540), trans. Richard Hyrde: "for [a woman] to be 'eloquent of speche' is tantamount to babbling and 'a token of a light mynde and shrowde conditions.'" See also Dana E. Aspinall, ed., *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge: 2002), 10.

26 Frances Dolan, "One Flesh, Two Heads: Debating the Biblical Blueprint for Marriage in the Seventeenth and Twentieth Centuries," Huntington Library, Los Angeles, 23 February 2008. See also her forthcoming book, *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).