

Blood and Control: Desdemona's Murder in *Othello*

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Othello's marital and sexual anxieties form a crack in his mental state that Iago exploits, with Desdemona becoming collateral damage by the fault of her gender. Iago's seeds of doubt grow to consume Othello's mind, as Othello decides to smother Desdemona. Just as the marriage causes uneasiness for Othello, it similarly does so for the audience, as it is never clear whether Othello and Desdemona consummate their relationship. The anticipation for that moment eventually converges with anticipation for Desdemona's death, until all that the audience can focus on is the fateful bed.¹ Though Iago has no overt problem with Desdemona, he takes advantage of her position as Othello's wife and the idea of her sexuality to awaken dormant insecurity from within Othello. Though of deliberation and murder, the beat² of Desdemona's death reads as a sexual one, with the fusing of intimacy and death breaking Othello's sexual tension. Simultaneously, the audience remains captive to the ultimate break of the dramatic tension in the play—no matter the culminating action, initially assumed sex or actual murder, the language proves difficult to endure.

Othello soliloquizes in Desdemona's bedchamber, as he watches her sleep and considers different ways to kill her. Conjugating the blood that would accompany Desdemona's loss of virginity in consummation, Othello reflects, "Yet I'll not shed her blood,/ Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow."³ Here, the beat parallels Othello's fixation on Desdemona's purity: the "blood[ying]" of the bedsheets. Ironically, Othello never "shed[s]" her blood, either sexually or violently, but the importance to Othello is control—or lack thereof—over this bloodshed and, hence, control over his wife. In a disturbing way, Othello still seems enthralled with Desdemona, as he recognizes her beauty and "skin" "whiter [...] than snow." The sexualization of her body

¹ Neill, Michael. "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1989).

² The beat starts at Act V scene ii with Othello's soliloquy and ends with Desdemona's death within the scene at line 123. The beat progresses from talk of murder to the physical act.

³ William Shakespeare, *Othello* (New York: Penguin, 1997), V.ii. 3-4. All subsequent citations are from this edition and will appear parenthetically.

offers audiences a reminder of Othello's insecurities over Desdemona's sexuality and his fear of inadequacy as her husband. His infatuation at a moment of cruelty ties their romance to its fatal end. As Desdemona awakens to find him near, she remarks on his demeanor: "Some bloody passion shakes your very frame" (V.ii.44). As one possibility for a lack of consummation could be Othello's own inability to perform sexually (with "the young effects in [him] defunct,") the audience still endures viewing him in an agitated state, evocative of the missing bedroom scene (I.iii.258-259). Desdemona and Othello's interactions highlight the duality within the tone of the beat or, rather, to take this idea to its tragic conclusion, the conflation of passion and violation: murder becomes Othello's form of ultimate release.

For the audience, murder, though still difficult to watch, poses a different viewing experience than the typically taboo bedroom scene. Desdemona cannot reason with Othello, whose mind is fully absorbed in the twisted fantasy Iago has created. Othello responds to Desdemona's pleading without remorse, and explains that any denial of her supposed wrongdoing "cannot remove nor choke the strong conception/ That I do groan withal" (V.ii.55-56). He stands over her in the bed while saying so, thereby offering an unnervingly similar picture and vocabulary to the absent scene of their consummation. His mention of "choke" forebodes his upcoming actions, and "groan" forces the audience to confront the only two fates seemingly available to Desdemona: the now foreclosed possibility of Othello sleeping with her, or her imminent murder at his hands. The audience watches an irrational husband smother his own wife. Desdemona, in her last breath, says her death is the fault of "Nobody— I myself. Farewell," after previously professing, "a guiltless death I die" (V.ii.121&123). The dynamic between these two phrases illustrates both Desdemona's guiltlessness and an acceptance of responsibility based on her "failure" as Othello's wife; she internalizes the right for Othello to

do whatever he wants to her body. The dramatic irony of her innocence proves disheartening for the audiences as a distressing yet simultaneously placating death arrives instead of a wedding night. Murder replaces love—but as it fills the place of an intended intimate scene, the uncomfortable sexual tone of the dialogue and action is inescapable.

Desdemona transforms into a vessel that Iago uses for revenge and through which Othello funnels his insecurities. While the tension builds in the beat as Desdemona realizes her fate, the beat also serves as a culmination of the tensions—both for the characters and the audience—building throughout the play as a whole. In the early days of his marriage, Othello attests, “If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy; for, I fear, / My soul hath her content so absolute” (II.i.186-188). Beneath Othello’s happiness is profound anxiety for control over his future. Desdemona became the object of all of her husband’s fears and passions and, in a grapple for control after Iago’s manipulations, Othello desires to get rid of her presence and thus eliminate his fears. While Desdemona’s murder is the culmination of Othello’s demise, the sexual nature of the beat allows one to view it also as the end of any intimate tension. Relief for Othello can only be achieved from Desdemona on their marital bed. Her death exists as the ultimate sexualization, as in Othello’s now twisted logic, it proves equal to consummation and his ownership of her. If he couldn’t have her, no one could. Desdemona’s bloodless death releases the stress of the beat and ultimately the stress of the play for the audience, as this tragic love, without an affair, comes to a close.

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