

# "Being Born a Girl": Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*

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## Abstract

*Desdemona* is a collaboration among writer Toni Morrison, theater director Peter Sellars, and musician Rokia Traoré. Morrison's text, a series of monologues and dialogues spoken by an actress who plays Desdemona and channels various other characters, alternates with songs written and performed by Traoré, a renowned Malian singer and composer. This hybrid narrative of words and music insists upon a radical rereading of *Othello* as it pushes against aesthetic, generic, and ideological boundaries. Both prequel and sequel to Shakespeare's play, this work expands and re-envision the story of his tragic heroine by imagining Desdemona's girlhood as well as her afterlife. Desdemona tells us her story from the other side of the grave, the "undiscovered country" Hamlet famously evokes. Morrison's desire to create a more significant role for Desdemona came from her sense that Shakespeare's tragic heroine has been given insufficient attention, particularly in performances, a neglect that can be located in the critical tradition as well. Morrison's reconstruction of Desdemona as a young girl is a rich lyrical narrative in itself, but as a creative appropriation it explicitly positions itself in dialogue with Shakespeare's articulation of Desdemona and with a tradition of critical and performative interpretations of her character.

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On 15 May 2011, *Desdemona* premiered at the Akzent Theatre in Vienna, Austria. Billed as a combined concert and theatrical experience, *Desdemona* is a collaboration among writer Toni Morrison, theater director Peter Sellars, and musician Rokia Traoré. Morrison's text, a series of monologues and dialogues spoken by the actress who plays Desdemona and channels various other characters, alternates with songs written and performed by Traoré, a renowned Malian singer and composer. Among Shakespeare's works, *Othello* is one of the plays most frequently adapted and appropriated by playwrights, poets, novelists, and composers, but *Desdemona*, a hybrid narrative of words and music, insists upon a radical rereading of *Othello* as it pushes against aesthetic, generic, and ideological boundaries.

After its initial staging, *Desdemona* was performed throughout Europe before travelling to New York and Berkeley, and finally London, where it was featured in the World Shakespeare Festival, as part of the Cultural Olympiad of 2012. In numerous interviews, Morrison, Sellars, and Traoré

describe the conception and creation of Desdemona. In short: Sellars once explained to Morrison that he found Shakespeare's *Othello* "a thin play" with stereotypical principal characters. Morrison convinced Sellars that there was more textual depth to Desdemona than productions had typically extrapolated, but she conceded that even Shakespeare had not allowed Desdemona to tell her full story. Sellars challenged Morrison to write that story and after enlisting Traoré's participation in the project, a three-part collaboration was born. Theatrical performances are ephemeral; there are some brief YouTube clips but no full-length video or audio recordings, without which we cannot provide a full analysis of the musical components of the production. However, Morrison's text was published in 2012, allowing us to read *Desdemona* in conjunction with *Othello*.

### Morrison and Talking Back to Shakespeare

*Desdemona* is both prequel and sequel to Shakespeare's play, for it expands and re-envisions the story of his tragic heroine by imagining Desdemona's girlhood as well as her afterlife. Desdemona tells us her story from the other side of the grave, the "undiscovered country" that Hamlet famously evokes. Morrison's reconstruction of Desdemona as a young girl is in itself a rich lyrical narrative, but as a creative appropriation it positions itself explicitly in dialogue with Shakespeare's articulation of Desdemona and even more importantly, with a tradition of critical and performative interpretations of her character.

As Sellars writes in the foreword to *Desdemona*, Toni Morrison's entire fictional oeuvre "honors the missing histories of generations whose courage, struggles, achievements, loves, tragedies, fulfillments and disappointments have gone unrecorded" (Sellars 2012, 7). In this work, it is the lacunae in Desdemona's history that Morrison is filling. "Talking back to Shakespeare," a term common in intertextual discourse and one that Morrison herself adopts, is not a new phenomenon. Particularly since the late twentieth century, women writers and feminist scholars have responded to Shakespeare with numerous retellings, revisions, amplifications, and critical re-readings, as those by Kate Chedgzoy (1995), Christy Desmet (1999), Peter Erickson (1991 and 2013), Marianne Novy (1993 and 1999) and many others have demonstrated. Nor is it the first time Morrison herself has engaged with Shakespeare in her fiction. Malin LaVon Walther, for example, reads Morrison's *Tar Baby* as a "corrective counterpoint to Shakespeare's *Tempest*" (1993, 137), while Chris Roark claims that in *The Bluest Eye*, "Morrison uses *Hamlet* as a foil in order to critique . . . the alienation imposed by Hamlet's 'soliloquy sense' of the self" (2013, 1). Perhaps even more important than tracing intertextual connections to specific Shakespeare plays is Morrison's larger project: "her trademark juxtaposition of African-American texts with" canonical European and American texts

in order to "critique and reconstruct the assumptions, practices, and critical interpretations of Euro-American texts" (Walther 1993, 137).

The scholarly discourse on adaptation, appropriation, and intertextuality is rich, extensive, and often productively contested, as evidenced by the mission of this journal. Julie Sanders's distinction between adaptation and appropriation offers a useful departure point: whereas adaptation "signals a relationship with an informing source text or original" and that relationship is explicit and recognizable, appropriation "frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (2006, 26). According to this paradigm, Morrison's *Desdemona* is clearly an appropriation, for it is something "wholly new" — so much so that its creators were not even sure what to name it. As Sellars explained in an interview, "A concert? A theatrical experience? We'll split the difference" ("*Desdemona Takes the Microphone*" 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Another innovation of this "theatrical experience" is the superimposition of text, prominently displayed on the background of the otherwise spare, dark stage. Because *Desdemona* was performed in multiple countries, this served the simple, practical purpose of translation for the audience. Sellars's long career as a director of opera may have inspired this strategy, but in the world of Shakespearean productions, such a fusion of text and performance is unusual. In an essay on *Prospero's Books*, the avant-garde film based on *The Tempest*, Douglas Lanier discusses the tension between Shakespeare on the page and Shakespeare on the stage, the debate over whether the "book" or theatrical productions can claim greater authority. For Lanier, *Prospero's Books* bridges this "familiar competition," confronting and transforming the burden of the book into a visually rich cinematic vocabulary. Similarly, Morrison's *Desdemona* successfully conjoins the lyrics boldly printed on the backdrop with the words spoken by the actress playing *Desdemona* and the songs performed by Traoré. No single artistic element claims dominance.

### Restoring *Desdemona's* Voice

The new cultural product that Morrison creates, however, is not just a matter of expanding the generic boundaries of theater. Morrison's initial interest in this project was driven by the characterization of *Desdemona*: she argued that the *Desdemona* of Shakespeare's text was richer and more substantial than most stage and screen representations, but that she still deserved the amplification of character conferred by having a fuller narrative. Gérard Genette's description of character revision as one of many intertextual strategies speaks to Morrison's purpose: "The revaluation of a character consists in investing him or her — by way of pragmatic or psychological

transformation — with a more significant and/or more 'attractive' role in the value system of the hypertext than was the case in the hypotext" (Genette 1997, 50).

Morrison's desire to create a more significant role for Desdemona came from her sense that Shakespeare's tragic heroine has been given insufficient attention, particularly in performances; this neglect can be located in the critical tradition as well. In her survey of the theatrical history of *Othello*, Virginia Mason Vaughan demonstrates that "before the arrival of feminist criticism, English-language critics had little to say about Desdemona," a minimization also found in stage productions (1997, 48). The principal reasons for this neglect were "an aesthetic definition of tragedy [that] excluded most of her scenes as trivial" and an idealization of Desdemona that the text did not consistently support (66). Edward Pechter also describes Desdemona's legacy of theatrical misrepresentation: "Whether celebrating or deploring it, the critical tradition has been remarkably consistent for two centuries in describing Desdemona as silent, submissive, and in a sense even complicit in her own murder. It is therefore worth noticing on what an unsubstantial foundation this massive interpretive edifice has been constructed" (2012, 124). In particular, Pechter reads Desdemona's verbal objections and physical struggle in the bedroom scene as a refutation of charges of passivity and acquiescence in her murder. In recent decades, numerous critics have also objected to the tradition of Desdemona's diminishment and various authors have rendered a more powerful Desdemona in their feminist revisions.

Indeed, Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* is not the first example of an artistic reconfiguration of Desdemona. Anne MacDonald's 1990 comedy, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (1990) unites two of Shakespeare's familiar heroines and rescues them from their tragic demise. Paula Vogel's 1987 comedy, *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*, goes even further in creating an audacious Desdemona who proudly acknowledges her sexual exploits. However, as Elizabeth Gruber points out, "Though Desdemona redresses the marginalization of female characters in Shakespeare's play, Vogel's text also offers a piercing critique of women's collusion in patriarchal structures" (2008, 2). Vogel's Desdemona professes to take control of her sexual desires, but this independence does not ultimately prevent her tragic death. Both Vogel and MacDonald are interested in a spirited and contemporary response to the heterosexual politics of tragedy; Morrison's work, on the other hand, offers a more complex and expansive narrative, situating Desdemona within her own historical context and within the homosocial community of women that Shakespeare's play invokes.

### Desdemona's Childhood

The first strategy that Morrison uses to create a more substantial Desdemona is to allow her a childhood. In *Othello*, we meet Desdemona as a young woman of marriageable age, but we hear nothing of her girlhood until 4.3, when she briefly and obliquely mentions her mother's maid, Barbary. But in Morrison's work, Desdemona vividly describes her experiences growing up, her relationship with her parents and with Barbary, and her attempts as a young girl to construct and defend her own identity in a rigidly patriarchal world. Peter Erickson argues that whereas in *Othello*, Desdemona's initial display of verbal authority is erased by her ultimate silencing, symbolically rendered by the particular manner of her death, Morrison, "closely attuned to the dynamic of female speech and silence in Shakespeare's plays . . . restore[s] Desdemona's voice" (2013, 2). For our purposes, we would add that Morrison establishes this restoration by recounting Desdemona's girlhood: hearing about Desdemona's development as a child enlarges our understanding of the adult woman she becomes and the choices she makes.

The work begins with Desdemona defiantly laying claim to her own selfhood: "My name is Desdemona," she declares in the opening line, but after explaining that her name means "misery," "ill fated," and "doomed," she rejects the connotations of the identity her parents gave her: "I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose." In refusing to accept the tragic implications that her name forecasts, Desdemona resists the circumscribed role dictated by both her parents and Venetian society:

Perhaps my parents  
Believed or imagined or knew my fortune  
at the moment of my birth. Perhaps being  
born a girl I gave them all they needed to  
know of what my life would be like. That it  
would be subject to the whims of my elders  
and the control of men. Certainly that was  
the standard, no, the obligation of females  
in Venice when I was a girl. (Morrison 2012, 13)

While Desdemona is reflecting back from the vantage of adulthood, she understood even as a young girl that "men made the rules, women followed them," a practice Desdemona's mother and father willingly accepted:

My parents, keenly aware and approving of  
that system, could anticipate the future of a

girl child accurately. (13)

Social historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford describe the commonly shared gender prejudices of early modern parenting: "In practice, a good deal of contemporary evidence supports the view that even before the birth of a child, elite parents felt differently about the prospect of a son or daughter. One preacher observed, 'it is a greater blessing to have a sonne, then a daughter.' More bluntly, the Italian Ochino remarked, 'commonly we rejoice at the birth of Boyes, and grieve at the birth of Girles'" (1998, 80). As Mendelson and Crawford demonstrate, class concerns intersected with gender bias: "elite parents" — as Desdemona's were — were often disappointed about the birth of daughters, who represented a financial liability and demanded a particular upbringing: "Most girls remained with their families, where they were educated by their mothers. They were taught to behave differently from boys. They were to be more restrained, and to preserve their chastity. Bodily comportment for the two sexes was different. While a girl was cautioned about modesty before she was three a boy of the same age was urged to 'take up his Coats, and piss like a Man'" (89).

The duration of girlhood was also dependent upon class status. Lower-class girls were typically sent into service at a fairly young age, precipitating an earlier transition to adulthood. On the other hand, "daughters of families of higher status were more likely to remain at home under the direct supervision of their mothers. In this sense, the childhood of wealthier girls as a privileged and protected status was prolonged, while independence was forced upon the poorest girls at a very early age" (Mendelson and Crawford 1998, 92). But as Desdemona's story demonstrates, privilege and protection equaled confinement.

Morrison's Senator Brabantio, Desdemona's father, corresponds with Shakespeare's description of a powerful Venetian citizen who wants to make a respectable marriage for his daughter:

His sole interest in me as  
I grew into womanhood was making certain  
I was transferred, profitably and securely,  
into the hands of another man. (Morrison 2012, 20)

More significant — and not atypical in either early modern practice or drama — is that Desdemona's mother participates in the oppressiveness of what Desdemona calls "that system." In a now well-known essay, "Where Are the Mothers in Shakespeare?" Mary Beth Rose (1991) reminds us that an increased presence of Shakespearean mothers would not necessarily have mitigated

the strictures of patriarchal rule over daughters: witness Lady Capulet's refusal to support Juliet's objections to marrying Paris. When Juliet begs her mother to intervene with her father, her mother dismisses her: "Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.5. 202).

In *Desdemona*, M. Brabantio adheres to the same code of wifely obedience as Lady Capulet, modeling proper female submissiveness for her daughter:

My mother was a lady of virtue whose  
practice and observation of manners were  
flawless. She taught me how to handle myself  
at table, how to be courteous in speech,  
when and how to drop my eyes, smile,  
curtsey. As was the custom, she did not  
tolerate dispute from a child, nor involve  
herself in what could be called my interior  
life. There were strict rules of deportment,  
solutions for every problem a young  
girl could have. And there was sensible  
punishment designed for each impropriety.  
Constraint was the theme of behavior.  
Duty was its plot. (Morrison 2012, 17)

Desdemona's mother cares more about appropriate outward behavior, the deliberate fashioning of her daughter as "a lady of virtue," than her daughter's "interior life." This recalls the thematic opposition between "being" and "seeming" in *Othello*, where the tragic outcomes are driven by characters' privileging of appearance over reality. Morrison's Desdemona, however, resists these constraints over her true, inner life and sensuous pleasures:

I remember once splashing barefoot in  
our pond, pretending I was one of the  
swans that swam there. My slippers were  
tossed aside; the hem of my dress wet. My  
unleashed laughter was long and loud.  
The unseemliness of such behavior in a  
girl of less than one decade brought my  
mother's attention. Too old, she scolded,

for such carelessness . . . my desires, my  
imagination must remain hidden. (17)

### Desdemona's First Storyteller

But if Desdemona's mother was punitive and restrictive, the young girl found comfort in her relationship with her nurse, whom she called Barbary. In *Othello*, we hear of Barbary briefly in 4.3, often referred to as the "unpinning scene" because Emilia, Desdemona's maid and confidante, is undressing her in compliance with Othello's command that she prepare for bed. Desdemona reminisces while Emilia attends her:

My mother had a maid called Barbary,  
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad  
And did forsake her. She had a song of "Willow."  
An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,  
And she died singing it. That song tonight  
Will not go from my head . . . (*Othello*, 4.3.26-31)

From this brief reference in Shakespeare's play, Morrison constructs Desdemona's relationship with her servant from northern Africa. Barbary represented all that Desdemona's mother did not: comfort, generosity, pleasure, spontaneity:

My solace in those early days lay with my  
nurse, Barbary. . .  
. . . She was more alive than  
anyone I knew and more loving. She tended  
me as though she were my birth mother;  
braided my hair, dressed me, comforted me  
when I was ill and danced with me when I  
recovered. I loved her. Her heart, so wide,  
seemed to hold the entire world in awe and  
savor its every delight. (Morrison 2012, 18)

Through this fuller characterization of Barbary, Morrison reminds us that Othello would not have been Desdemona's first encounter with a person of color; nor were his infamous and seductive tales of adventure the first exotic stories she heard:

. . . Barbary alone conspired with



me to let my imagination run free. She told  
 me stories of other lives, other countries,  
 places where gods speak in thundering  
 silence and mimic human faces and forms.  
 Where nature is not a crafted, pretty thing,  
 but wild, sacred and instructive. Unlike the  
 staid, unbending women of my country, she  
 moved with the fluid grace I saw only in  
 swans and the fronds of willow trees. (18)

Barbary, a black woman, complicates the simpler binaries that obtain in Shakespeare's play: Othello/Desdemona, male/female, black/white. In *Desdemona*, Barbary is associated with both Desdemona and Othello. She becomes a surrogate mother figure for Desdemona: they both find comfort in the arts of storytelling and music; they both appreciate the sensual pleasures of the natural world; and they both die because of ill-fated love. But Barbary's race, her origins, and her captivating narratives also signal her kinship with Othello. And like Othello, Barbary is connected with a wild and primitive natural world; however, Barbary's "nature . . . is sacred and instructive" whereas Othello's is manifest in a savage bestiality. The most obvious correspondence between the two occurs when Desdemona first meets Othello. At the time, Desdemona is mourning Barbary's recent death: forsaken by her lover, "her spacious heart drained and sere, Barbary died" (20). Complicating Desdemona's grief is her determination to learn from Barbary's experience and "search more carefully for the truth of a lover before committing my own fidelity" (20). When she is introduced to Othello, she immediately thinks of Barbary: "I saw a glint of brass in his eyes identical to the light in Barbary's eyes" (23).

In both *Othello* and *Desdemona*, storytelling is Othello's means of wooing: when Brabantio invited Othello to entertain him with the "story of [his] life," Othello explains, Desdemona would "with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse." Observing her interest in his tales, Othello continued to narrate his "pilgrimage":

. . . My story being done,  
 She gave me for my pains a world of sighs . . .  
 She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished  
 That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,  
 And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,  
 I should but teach him how to tell my story. (*Othello*, 1.3.159-68)

While some critics have seen Desdemona's auditory role as a sign of passive reception, others have ascribed more agency to Desdemona's listening. Heather James, for example, argues that Desdemona's response to Othello's narrative "reveals how her emotions, through sympathetic audition, have become as strange and wondrous as Othello's tale of heroic suffering . . . Attentive, serious, lovesick, greedy, [she] is ready to leap from representation to action" (2001, 376). In Morrison's articulation, however, what matters is that the stories Barbary told to Desdemona as a young girl — stories "of other lives, other countries / places where gods speak in thundering silence" — are what stimulate further interest in Othello's exotic tales.

Rather than adding "missing scenes" to Shakespeare's *Othello*, Morrison gives her Desdemona the opportunity to tell her stories from the "other side of the grave." This literary tactic harkens back to Homer and Dante, but in Morrison's work, the setting represents more than a temporary trip to the underworld. As Morrison herself explains, this was an artistically liberating strategy, for the timelessness of the afterlife, where "there is nothing to lose," allows for honest revelations, productive encounters, and genuine forgiveness. In the same interview, Traoré adds that composing musical dialogue to be sung "from the grave means you're beyond a place of fear . . . you have the space to speak about things that are difficult to speak about in life" ("Desdemona Takes the Microphone," Part 1 [2011]). Desdemona celebrates the narrative freedom of the afterworld: "I exist . . . between life on earth and life beyond it . . . I exist in places where I can speak, at last, words that in earth were sealed or twisted into the language of obedience" (Morrison 2012, 14). The setting, which Morrison argued was essential to the success of her enterprise, offers an opportunity for human interaction and reconciliation not accommodated by the conventional genre of tragedy.

Morrison's project extends beyond giving Desdemona herself a more complex role to amplifying her relationships with the other women in *Othello*. While other contemporary appropriations may reconfigure elements of plot, *Desdemona* maintains the contours of Shakespeare's narrative; instead, she refocuses the dispositions of the central and marginal characters in *Othello* — namely, the women. Morrison ascribes interiority to the female characters, more fully imagines and complicates Desdemona's relationships with them, reconfigures the nature of her relationship with Othello, and dramatically minimizes the role of Iago, all of which create a space that undermines male dominance and asserts female autonomy. That the actress who plays Desdemona also channels the other characters — except Barbary — is another interesting innovation of this work: by giving them voice, Desdemona fully internalizes their experiences, signifying her developing empathy and understanding.

### Giving Voice to Mothers and Maids

Morrison's emphasis on the female relationships in Desdemona is first evident in the brief scene in which the mothers of the tragic lovers come together. Neither of these characters actually appears in *Othello*, and they are only mentioned briefly, but in *Desdemona* they are realized and given voice. Their meeting typifies the overarching pattern of *Desdemona*, in which encounters between two characters begin by acknowledging antagonisms and differences and end in forgiveness — or end with at least the potential for forgiveness. M. Brabantio may have been a strict and unforgiving mother, but she is devastated by Desdemona's murder, just as Soun, Othello's mother, grieves her son's suicide. When Soun asks, "Are we enemies then?" M. Brabantio replies, "Of course. Our vengeance is more molten than our sorrow." However, they eventually come together with Soun's suggestion that they adopt her cultural tradition and "build an altar to the spirits who are waiting to console us" (Morrison 2012, 26-27). This gradual movement towards mutual respect is never sentimentalized; Morrison's characters only achieve a generosity of spirit because they are first allowed honest — if uncomfortable — expression of their anger. This fraught but ultimate understanding also marks Desdemona's encounters with Emilia, Barbary, and Othello.

Desdemona's meeting with Emilia recalls the "unpinning scene" of *Othello*, in which the two women converse while following Othello's orders that Desdemona prepare for bed. As Vaughan (1997), Pechter (2012), and others have demonstrated, this scene has frequently been eliminated in performance because the frank dialogue about sexuality between Desdemona and Emilia does not conform to an image of idealized womanhood. Denise Whalen also explores the performance history of this scene, demonstrating that the differences between the edited 1622 quarto and the 1623 Folio text "reveal an inclination to suppress and restrain female agency." Whalen concludes that "the history of this scene in performance shows an unnerving disposition to still the female voice, which makes it all the more remarkable that Shakespeare wrote the scene at all" (2007, 508).

In recent decades, however, stage and film performances have typically restored this scene, in which the two women discuss marriage, infidelity, and gender inequities with such candor that some critics uphold it as an example of Shakespeare's proto-feminism. Emilia's angry outburst that men can be unfaithful with impunity while women are punished for the same deed is contrasted with Desdemona's more naïve doubt that women would "abuse their husbands / In such gross kind" (*Othello*, 4.3.62-63). Against Emilia's saucy resentment and sexual banter, Desdemona's innocent questioning reinforces the ubiquitous virgin/whore dichotomy. However, as Lynda Boose points out, their seemingly blunt conversation is also marked by numerous retractions and digressions that indicate a significant "interplay of denial, repression, and displacement" and challenge notions of simplistic female characterization (2004, 439). Furthermore, while this scene has often been touted as an occasion of female community rarely found in Shakespeare's tragedies,

Boose reminds us that the women in the play more often displace the problems in their heterosexual relationships onto each other than on men. In *Othello*, female solidarity overwhelmingly buckles under the dominance of the heterosexual bond.

Morrison confronts this scene from *Othello* and its ramifications for female community in her encounter between Desdemona and Emilia. Their conversation begins in harsh recrimination: as in *Othello*, Morrison's Emilia is brazen and pragmatic and Desdemona quietly self-righteous. Desdemona reminds Emilia,

. . . You and I were friends,  
but didn't the man you knelt to protect run  
a gleaming sword through your survival  
strategies? (Morrison 2012, 43)

Emilia's rebuke reveals the fissures in their alleged friendship:

And why did he? Because I befriended and  
supported you. I exposed his lies, you ingrate!  
That is your appreciation for my devotion to  
you? "My cloak, Emilia," "My night gown,  
Emilia."  
"Unpin me, Emilia." "Arrange my bedsheets,  
Emilia." That is not how you treat a friend;  
that's how you treat a servant." (43)

But as Emilia explains that her hardened worldview resulted from the many disappointments in her life, she and Desdemona approach common understanding. Emilia tells Desdemona, "Like you I believed marriage was my salvation. It was not." Not only was her marriage filled with lust rather than love, but "that passion generated nothing." Her childlessness was even more painful because she was herself an orphan. This is a revelation to Desdemona, who replies sympathetically, "I wish I had known you when we were children . . . You had no mother. I had no mother's love." When Emilia objects that "It's not the same," Desdemona apologizes: "You are right to correct me. Instead of judging, I should have been understanding" (44). Emilia is given the last word; after thanking Desdemona for her apology, she concludes with a lyrical description of a lizard she once saw that "shed her dull outer skin . . . exposing that which had been underneath — her jeweled self," but she keeps the old skin in case she needs to camouflage "her true dazzle." Emilia cites this as a metaphor

for her own survival skills, and her conclusion, "that little lizard changed my life" announces her insistence on being seen as resourceful and resilient (44).

If Shakespeare's conversation between these two women is problematic for its circumlocutions, Morrison's rendering is equally disconcerting for its penetrating honesty. Morrison does not rush her characters to facile friendship; they ultimately achieve a measure of mutual understanding, but only after airing their grievances and sorrows. While these truthful encounters give voice to the women individually, they also strengthen female bonds, in counterpoint to the representation of same-sex relationships in *Othello*, in which male allegiances overwhelm ties between women.

### Restoring Barbary's Voice

The trajectory from recrimination to empathetic understanding is particularly evident in Desdemona's meeting with Barbary, which is the centerpiece of Morrison's work. Desdemona is thrilled when she first sees Barbary, recalling the intimacy of their past together. But just as Desdemona misread her relationship with Emilia, she assumes that Barbary shared her view of their friendship. Instead, Barbary's response is pointed and bitter:

We shared nothing . . .  
 I mean you don't even know my name.  
 Barbary? Barbary is what you call Africa.  
 Barbary is the geography of the foreigner,  
 the savage. Barbary? Barbary equals the  
 sly, vicious enemy who must be put down  
 at any price; held down at any cost for the  
 conquerors' pleasure. Barbary is the name of  
 those without whom you could neither live  
 nor prosper. (Morrison 2012, 45)

She explains that her real name was Sa'ran, but Desdemona, still insisting upon her romanticized view of their relationship replies, "Well, Sa'ran, whatever your name, you were my best friend." Sa'ran disagrees: "I was your slave . . . I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned . . . So you don't know me. Have never known me" (45-46).

If social status was an impediment in Desdemona's relationship with Emilia, race is an added complication in her relationship with Sa'ran. Just as Shakespeare's *Othello* is repeatedly constructed in racial terms — including a comparison to a Barbary horse — Sa'ran's westernized name, Barbary, defines her in racial terms as "the foreigner, the savage." But Desdemona, in the

problematic posture of alleged "color blindness," insists that racial differences were irrelevant to her:

. . . Think. I wed a Moor. I fled my  
home to be with him. I defied my father, all  
my family to wed him. I joined him on the  
battlefield. (Morrison 2012, 46)

Sa'ran refuses Desdemona's justification and proffered kinship and elaborates on her role as servant: "I have no rank in your world. I do what I am told." But Desdemona counters that she too suffered restraints: "I had no more control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was prison still." Desdemona's next question marks the turning point in their conversation: "Was I ever cruel to you? Ever?" to which Sa'ran replies, "No. You never hurt or abused me" (48).

Sa'ran acknowledges that her deepest suffering was caused by the lover who betrayed her, an experience Desdemona understands: while social status and race separate them, they share common ground as women who died because of the men they loved. Desdemona seems to invoke her own death when she asks Sa'ran:

. . . Remember the song  
You sang every day until you wasted away  
and embraced death without fight or protest? (48)

Sa'ran then sings the iconic "willow song" from *Othello*, but follows with a more triumphant revision, concluding, "What bliss to know I will never die again." Desdemona rejoins, replacing Sa'ran's individual pronoun with a plural: "We will never die again." Morrison's purpose is not to rewrite the women's past experiences and differences, but to transcend them in the afterlife: now, they both refuse to represent victimized women. But their common understanding does not come easily.

### Desdemona, Othello, and "The Possibility of Wisdom"

Desdemona's conversation with Othello is also marked by a tentative progression towards revelation and acceptance. They begin by acknowledging what numerous readers and critics of *Othello* have cited as one source of their tragic outcome: Desdemona and Othello fell in love with idealized versions of each other. Morrison elaborates on this reading with Othello's complaint to Desdemona:

. . . You never loved me. You

fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner  
 who kills for the State, who will die for the  
 State. (Morrison 2012, 50)

While Shakespeare's Othello celebrates Desdemona's appreciation of his storytelling, Morrison's Othello criticizes Desdemona for her blind attraction to his exotic narrative that was "a useful myth, a fairy's tale cut to suit a princess' hunger for real life."

As with the other characters, Morrison allows Othello a fuller backstory, making him a more complex character who becomes both more and less sympathetic. Just as Morrison's more substantial characterization of Desdemona is informed by an account of her girlhood, Morrison's Othello offers a detailed description of his boyhood. His mother died when he was young, and he was raised by a woman whose affinity for music and the natural world recalls Barbary:

As an orphan child a root woman adopted  
 me as her son and sheltered me from slavers.  
 I trailed her in forests and over sere as she  
 searched for medicinal plants . . .  
 She worshipped the natural world and  
 encouraged me to rehearse songs to  
 divine its power. (Morrison 2012, 31)

But this idyllic upbringing ends when he is captured by Syrians and becomes a child soldier, an immersion in a military world that challenges Shakespeare's articulation of Othello as noble warrior and great general. Morrison's Othello offers a pragmatic explanation of his early training "where food was regular and clothing respectable" and where he turned his "childish anger" into military accomplishments: "I was happy, breathless, and hungry for more violent encounters" (31). Othello tells Desdemona stories of his exotic travels during wartime, including an account of Amazon women that Desdemona finds inspiring, and these tales are even more lyrical and elaborate than the counterparts in Shakespeare's play. But he also adds "tales of horror and strange," of a soldier's world in which drugs were routine and "rape was perfunctory" and then confesses the most disturbing experience of all: once, "aroused by bloodletting" in combat, he and Iago came upon two elderly women hiding in a stable, and they raped them repeatedly. This horrific act created a bond between the two men, "an exchange of secrecy" (38).

Morrison highlights the contrast between homosocial bonding for men and women; particularly in a war zone, male alliances result, at least in part, from shared violence and cruelty. In taking

on the project of *Desdemona*, Morrison explained that one of her goals was to eliminate Iago's overwhelming presence so that other characters could reclaim the narrative, but she does not erase him entirely, as his destructive impact is still evident. While Shakespeare's Othello seems entirely deceived by Iago, Morrison's Desdemona, however, insists that Othello must have known that Iago was lying about her alleged infidelity, yet still chose to believe him because of the power of "brotherhood." As Desdemona describes the "bright, tight camaraderie" between men, she positions it explicitly against their relationships with women:

. . . The wide,  
wild celebrity men find with each other  
cannot compete with the narrow comfort of  
a wife. Romance is always overshadowed  
by brawn. The language of love is trivial  
compared to the hidden language of men  
that lies underneath the secret language they  
speak in public. (Morrison 2012, 37)

In *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*, Marjorie Garber explores the tension between homosocial friendships and heterosexual relationships prevalent in Shakespeare's plays, a theme that has been taken up by subsequent scholars (Garber 1981). From Garber's perspective, in plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Winter's Tale*, or *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, same-sex friendship — either male or female — is portrayed as pre-sexual and innocent, almost prelapsarian, while relationships between men and women are inherently corrupted by the specter of sexuality. For Morrison, however, the distinction is not simply between innocence and experience regardless of gender, for *Desdemona* treats female community differently than "brotherhood." The female characters in *Desdemona* have confrontations that eventually develop into conversation and community, but there are no such encounters among the male characters. Homosocial bonding is destructive in that it results in violence against women and turns on itself, as evidenced within the confines of Shakespeare's play and in Othello's confession of rape in *Desdemona*. What Morrison acknowledges but does not condone is that this destructive behavior often derives from a culture of war. Thus, the references to conflict in Syria or child soldiers are not anachronistic, but a reminder of the timelessness of the issues *Desdemona* explores.

Morrison's reunion of Desdemona and Othello is not romantic and joyous; it is measured, mature, and mutually understanding. Desdemona tells Othello she cannot forgive the violence he committed against her — and other women — but that she can still love the flawed man: "Honest



love does not cringe" (Morrison 2012, 39). For his part, Othello regrets his behavior and realizes that "we should have had such honest talk, not fantasy" when they married. They apologize to each other, though Othello says that "apology is a pale word for what I am called upon to recognize" (54).

At the end of her work, Morrison directs Desdemona and Othello to a vision that is larger than their individual relationship. What they can now possess is "the possibility of wisdom" and the potential of helping to create a world in which "human peace" can be imagined:

If it's a question  
of working together  
on the task,  
I would be happy to take part.  
Whether we are from the same place or not.  
Whether we are from the same culture or not.  
Should we celebrate this moment?  
It would fill me with joy. (Morrison 2012, 56)

*Desdemona* culminates by celebrating the possibility of a community that transcends gender, cultural, and racial differences, of a world that offers hope and redemption. In the hands of a less accomplished writer, these concluding passages could become sentimental, even saccharine. Given Morrison's gift for lyricism, her conclusion is instead a profound alternative to the tragic destruction of *Othello*. It is almost axiomatic in Shakespearean studies that the male-centered tragedies privilege the individual, while the female-centered comedies celebrate community. Morrison's *Desdemona* does not transform *Othello* into a life-affirming dramatic comedy, but it does redirect the spotlight from the individual to the "greater good."

According to Gerard Génette's intertextual taxonomy, Morrison's revisionary project is to imbue Desdemona with greater significance in the "value system" (Génette 1997) than she had in *Othello*. Through the incorporation of Desdemona's girlhood experiences, which reveal her nascent sense of autonomy, and the confrontations and conversations within the parameters of female community, Morrison empowers Desdemona to overcome her destructive relationship with Othello. Even at the outset, however, Morrison hints at Desdemona's strength, for she defiantly asks,

Did you imagine me as a wisp of a girl?  
A coddled doll who fell in love with a  
handsome warrior who rode off with her

under his arm? (Morrison 2012, 16)

If Desdemona was ever imagined this way, Morrison asks us to think again.

### Notes

1. There are several print and recorded interviews available in which Sellars, Morrison, and Traoré discuss the *Desdemona* collaboration. See "Desdemona Takes the Microphone: Toni Morrison and Shakespeare's Hidden Women" (2011) and "Desdemona Panel Discussion" (2011). See also Peter Sellars on the origins of *Desdemona* (Sellars 2012).

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