

"'Late' has no meaning here": Imagining a Second Chance in Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*

Peter Erickson, Northwestern University

Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* dramatically displaces Othello as the title character in Shakespeare's play. Morrison's renaming signals her re-vision of *Othello* by giving Desdemona an afterlife that restores her voice and activates her pursuit of further development beyond Shakespearean limits and without Othello. What enables this change is Desdemona's exploration of newly established and newly emphasized bonds with female characters, notably Emilia and Barbary.

Adaptation versus Re-Vision

In our Shakespeare-centric culture, we participate in the continuity of a great tradition through which we receive and renew this legacy. Such renewal is valuable as an ongoing historical marker and artistic resource. But a potential danger of this reiteration is the complacency that results when a cultural heritage becomes static because new developments are always interpreted and co-opted, in circular fashion, as an adaptation and extension of Shakespeare's plays, which are viewed as the origin and foundation for all subsequent work. For a culture to keep growing, it also needs change and new directions.

One way to clarify and circumvent this problem is to pursue a dual critical approach that makes a sharp distinction between adaptation and re-vision. The present article is part of a cluster of new essays I have written since 2007 on a range of adaptive and revisionary responses to *Othello* by contemporary writers and visual artists.¹ In Adrienne Rich's classic definition of re-vision, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (Rich 1971, 35). From this perspective, it is possible to envision a departure that moves outside the Shakespearean framework. What is striking about Toni Morrison's engagement with Shakespeare is the extent to which her reinterpretation of *Othello* is grounded in close reading of Shakespeare's play.² This baseline allows Morrison to perform the

nearly impossible task of acknowledging the power of the old story in the process of creating a revision that breaks new ground.

Silencing/Reviving Desdemona

Prior to Desdemona's appearance on stage in Shakespeare's drama, Othello's narration of "the story of my life" (*Othello* 1.3.128) casts her in the role of listener, as the receiver of his well-told story, albeit an eager, appreciative one "with a greedy ear" (148).³ As soon as she arrives at the meeting of the Senate, however, she demonstrates a linguistic power of persuasion equal to Othello's. As though inspired by hearing Othello, Desdemona leaves behind her domestic life of "house affairs" (146) and quickly finds her own voice in the public arena. First, she addresses her father with confidence and exactitude about her marriage and allegiance to Othello (1.3.179-88). Her assertive stance is crystallized in the verb "challenge" (187), with which she concludes her speech. This forceful tone is amplified, when in her second, even more emphatic speech, she "trumpet[s] to the world" the "downright violence and storm of fortunes" (248-49) driving her love for Othello.

Acting on her own initiative, Desdemona makes a public appeal to Othello's superior, the Duke of Venice. No longer the "greedy ear" herself, she now becomes the speaker who offers her "unfolding" to the Duke's "prosperous ear" (246). Her request to accompany Othello on his assigned mission catches her husband off-guard and implicitly counters his conventional assumption that she would stay behind. Only after rehearsing, and reserving for himself, "the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice-driven bed of down" (228-29) does Othello observe protocol by attending to the necessary domestic arrangements: "I crave fit disposition for my wife" (234). Faced with Desdemona's unexpected rejection of "a heavy interim" (257) at home, Othello immediately backtracks and falls in line behind his wife's insistence that she will share his martial, as well as marital, "bed."

The wonderfully loud broadcast implied by Desdemona's image of the trumpet is not entirely music to Othello's ears, however. As though inspired by Botticelli's painting *Venus and Mars* (c. 1483), Othello's vivid anticipation of a "wanton dullness" (268) that makes a mockery of military gear almost seems to be asking for it: "Let housewives make a skillet of my helm" (271). When Othello again surveys the prized accoutrements of war, it is to say "farewell" (3.3.353): his "occupation's gone" (362), and "the shrill trump" (356) matches the shrillness of his agony.

Othello's belated support of Desdemona's desire to go to Cyprus exposes him because he feels the need to launch on a linguistically torturous digression on the reliability of his military masculinity and his immunity to male vulnerability to women. Although the intention is to reassure

the senators, the effect of spelling out, and dwelling on, the threat posed by the disabling distraction of female sexuality is to confirm the seriousness of this potential danger. The insecurity of his self-defense reactivates the hint of apprehensiveness already expressed in his negatively tinged definition of marriage as "circumscription and confine" (1.2.27). If the long final scene in Venice begins with Othello's display of verbal command, it ends with Desdemona's exercise of verbal authority.

The overall outcome of *Othello* is the silencing of Desdemona. In the final scene, Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of Desdemona's vocal power by prolonging the dramatization of its loss. Othello's chosen method of smothering targets the symbolic site of vocalization. Against Desdemona's bargaining for ever-shorter amounts of time — "Kill me tomorrow" (5.2.87), "But half an hour" (89), "But while I say one prayer" (91) — Othello is adamant: "It is too late" (92). Despite Othello's insistence that "there is no pause" (90), Shakespeare makes him wait until he is sure that Desdemona is dead — "Not quite dead?" (94). Othello continues to wait — "I think she stirs again. No . . . If she [Emilia] come in, she'll sure speak to my wife" (104-105) — so that he can verify her inability to speak before opening the door to allow Emilia to enter. Even then, Shakespeare upstages Othello — "That? What?" (128) — by reviving Desdemona to speak long enough to establish communication with Emilia: "Out and alas, that was my lady's voice! / . . . O lady, speak again! / Sweet Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak" (129-31). As though directly from Desdemona, the speaking role passes to Emilia — "I am bound to speak" (191) — until, in parallel with Desdemona, she too is silenced by her husband and dies bearing witness: "So come my soul to bliss as I speak true" (257).

Toni Morrison is closely attuned to the dynamic of female speech and silence in Shakespeare's play. Her drama foils the definitive finality of *Othello*'s tragic ending by creating in *Desdemona* an afterlife that builds on, and extends, Desdemona's revival by making it permanent rather than temporary. Othello's Shakespearean claim that "It is too late" is overturned: as Desdemona informs him, "'Late' has no meaning here" (10.55; Morrison 2012).⁴ This point of intervention allows Morrison to restore Desdemona's voice and to reopen the dramatic action. With the time constraint removed, she can not only resume speaking but also begin rethinking. Retrospective reflection facilitates a new understanding not possible to achieve under extreme pressure; hence, this special space becomes the basis of Morrison's potential alternative of a second chance.

In its overall structure, *Desdemona* consists of two main lines of action. The first is Desdemona's ongoing dialogue with Othello in the postmortem exploration of their relationship, conducted in sections 4, 6, 7, and 10. Running parallel to but apart from the first strand, the second

line is the development of female relationships in sections 5, 8, and 9. These two distinct threads are held in a dramatic tension that generates the production's galvanic force and revisionary edge.

The differences between *Othello* and *Desdemona* begin with Morrison's reorganization of the Shakespearean characters. A crucial step is the demotion of Iago when Morrison eliminates his onstage presence and limits him to marginal status as a name-only reference. Through this strategic interpretive move, Morrison places the emphasis on Othello and Desdemona as the makers of their own destinies and thus makes them logically the ones in the afterlife who are responsible for coming to terms with their own actions, with no recourse to blaming Iago. In downgrading Iago's importance, Morrison develops further Harry Berger's view that, in conventional readings of *Othello*, Iago's control and therefore responsibility are greatly exaggerated. Rather, Othello's and Desdemona's problematic contributions in effect do Iago's work for him: "If it all happens with startling rapidity, that's because it has already happened. Poor Iago has to huff and puff to keep up with his victims. It is almost too late to do further harm. The rapidity with which they destroy their relation makes him all but belated and dispensable" (Berger 2013, 137).

In creating female characters, Morrison reverses the process. In Shakespeare's play, Desdemona's mother (1.3.185, 4.3.25), Othello's mother (3.4.54), and Barbary (4.3.25) are largely notional figures who never actually appear but exist only as tangential references. Morrison changes the cast by making these women full-fledged characters, thereby expanding and empowering the female community. As already announced in her change of title, Morrison shifts the balance by re-centering the focus on Desdemona. By giving her access to an alternate world of women, Morrison's play gives Desdemona the option, not available in Shakespeare, of in-depth woman-to-woman conversations.

Othello's Confession

In his final speech after killing Desdemona, Othello issues to himself, as well as to others, this instruction: "Nothing extenuate" (5.2.351).⁵ There is, however, a conspicuous gap between this stipulation and the extenuations Othello actually makes as he strives to reshape the narrative structure of his identity in a way that remains ingratiating. Instead of the successive audiences of Brabantio (1.3.127-32), Desdemona (144-54), and the full senate (76-94) to whom he had told his story in Venice, Othello now has a one-man audience in the person of the state's representative Lodovico, to whose framework Othello's new self-presentation directly responds and adapts. The terms — "Till that the nature of your fault be known / To the Venetian state" (345-46) — set the stage by implying that the nature of Othello's "fault" is not yet determined. This unresolved issue

thus warrants further consideration and negotiation, to which Othello might contribute first-hand testimony and thus conceivably influence the verdict.

Perhaps Othello and the state have a mutual interest in protecting their common brand. The concerted Venetian effort to zero in on Iago as the culprit (311-12; 341-44; 378-79) could give Othello further encouragement to hope for a generous or at least mitigating assessment that would preserve his heroic image. His appeal to the Venetian state as the ultimate decision maker is direct: "I have done the state some service, and they know't" (348). As an extenuating gesture, this opening gambit makes its point with such embarrassing boldness that Othello quickly pivots to humble disclaimer: "No more of that" (349). Yet "no more" is as inaccurate as "a word or two" (347), since the end of Othello's long speech will circle back to his exemplary state service by employing his role as the protector when the "state" is "traded" (363). This memorable final image should have the power to validate the Senate's first impression of his military value and virtue.

Othello's "bloody period" (366) is not the end of the story, however. The final period is the kiss he bestows on the mute Desdemona as he proclaims his right "To die upon a kiss" (369), as though this demonstration might reenact, and thus reclaim and restore, his preferred former image as a lover. In fact, this moment is a grotesque realization of Othello's *Liebestod*-motivated kiss upon arrival in Cyprus: "May the winds blow till they have wakened death" (2.1.183); "If it were now to die / 'Twere now to be most happy" (186-87). At the end, Desdemona is not alive to utter her previous retort after their mutual kiss: "The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow" (2.1.190-92). The final scene presents Othello's kisses as literally a one-way communication. The last kiss recapitulates in full-circle display the opening kisses for Desdemona asleep: "One more, and that's the last" (5.2.19); these initial kisses foreshadow the last: "So sweet was ne'er so fatal"(5.2.20). Both moments demonstrate acts of self-involvement in which Othello writes his own script. Yet Othello's climactic gesture may nonetheless facilitate the best-face account toward which Lodovico instinctively gravitates because, with a sympathetic tweak, "dying upon a kiss" provides a tolerable closure for Othello's story; tragedy has its own forms of sentimentality.

Lodovico's summary in the final lines of the play — "Myself will straight aboard, and to the state, / This heavy act with heavy heart relate" (5.2.380-81) — sounds potentially aligned with Othello's request that "When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am" (350-51). In the play's last word, Lodovico echoes Othello's "relate," a term that calls attention to the act of telling as a narrative construction that poses choices among various possible styles and contents. If the "heavy heart" with which Lodovico transmits the updated story to the Senate invokes the spirit of Cassio's praise of Othello as "great of heart" (371), then the extenuating, painfully uncritical

spin that Othello puts on the relation of his "unlucky deeds" may be modulated for Venetian consumption into an acceptably conventional tragic form, as deserving our pity and support.

One has to agree with Othello's comment toward the very end of Toni Morrison's drama: "We should have had such honest talk, not fantasy, the evening we wed" (10.54). Belatedly, the couple attempts to articulate now what needed to be said then. Yet obstacles remain in play, and too often the new conversation veers back to a repetition of the old conversation. The question becomes to what extent "should have" is successfully translated into "honest talk."

The most astonishing new backstory information that Morrison provides for her Othello concerns the sexual activity at the heart of his military exploits. In the transition from section 6 to 7 of *Desdemona*, the pieces of Othello's story are recorded with the prefatory verb "told" four times until, reaching the fifth item, the verb switches to "confessed" when the subject of "rape" (6.36) is introduced and, in the next section, becomes a graphic account of the prolonged rape of the two elderly women that he and Iago pursue together. The two men's "mutual pleasure" (7.38) in shared sexuality creates an erotic charge that crystallizes Othello's primary allegiance to Iago. In her acerbic retrospect, Desdemona notes her recognition of the powerful force of the "bright, tight camaraderie" in "brotherhood" (7.37): "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" (7.37).

By sharing this confession with Desdemona, Othello proposes to make his "exchange of secrecy" (7.38) with Iago the basis of Othello's relationship with Desdemona: "Your gaze, spilling pity and understanding, emboldens me, giving me hope that this, my secret, will be our bond" (6.36). From Othello's point of view, the secret should function as a bond of trust with Desdemona, though at its core this secret negates the marriage. Othello's secret with Desdemona can never equal Othello's prior secret with Iago. Transfer of male power into the center of marriage asks Desdemona to accept her own subordination. This confession continues Othello's pattern of extenuation since, in expecting pity, he declines self-examination and seeks unearned forgiveness, as though the solution is her capacity for understanding, not his.

In the second chance afforded by the afterlife, Desdemona explicitly rejects the primacy of male relations to which Othello remains bound: "But real love, the love of an Amazon, is not based on pretty language or the secret sharing between males" (7.37). On the strength of the Amazon image, Desdemona speaks forthrightly and sets limits. To Othello's question "Can you forgive me?" she responds: "No, I cannot" (7.39). This setting aside of the issue of forgiveness begins to suggest how Morrison's revisionary approach to *Othello* differs from that of Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*. In line with Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" (*Harlem Duet* 114), Sears's main character Billie has

"exploded" but her recovery is made to hinge on "Forgiveness" (115): "I hate — I love him so — I forgive him now. And now" (116). This halting commitment is not completed, nor is it clear that this direction would completely address the full range of issues that Billie has so painfully raised throughout the play. Billie may risk cutting herself off from the "prophetic fury" contained in her given name Sibyl, which not only comes from Shakespeare's *Othello* (epigraph, *Harlem Duet* [19]) but also is passed down from her grandmother through her father (81). The second syllable of her given name echoes her nickname (byl/Bill) and, if we hear Billie as a version of William, suggests a family-derived alternative to Shakespeare. In bypassing forgiveness as the necessary outcome, Morrison keeps the prophetic voice active to the end. This firm limit creates a clear separation between Desdemona and Othello that changes and complicates their relationship in the afterlife and makes the deeper conversation in which they are now engaged so tentative and uncertain. In contrast to the female encounters, Desdemona's meeting with Othello ultimately seems unresolved, suspended, and even beside the point.

In Morrison's version, Desdemona's first meeting with Othello is based on a direct link to Barbary: "I saw a glint of brass in his eyes identical to the light in Barbary's eyes" (4.23). "Not yet recovered from Barbary's death" (4.23), Desdemona circumvents, and perhaps prematurely short-circuits, her deep mourning for the loss of Barbary when she quickly turns to Othello to fill the gap. The compressed overlapping of the two events maps Barbary onto Othello, making Othello almost a Barbary substitute. But Morrison's play enables Desdemona to differentiate between these two figures through her respective encounters with them in the afterlife. Ultimately Morrison reverses the Barbary-to-Othello trajectory as Desdemona, with the benefit of the afterlife, moves away from her marriage to Othello toward commitment to a newly fashioned alliance with Barbary.

Desdemona's Story

The sharp juxtaposition of Morrison's title *Desdemona* with Shakespeare's *Othello* is no sooner announced than it is further sharpened by Desdemona's immediate rejection of her name in the opening speech: "My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery . . . I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose" (1.13). In Shakespeare's play, Desdemona was silenced by a physical but bloodless assault directed at her throat and mouth, the source of vocalization. The work of this performance is to redefine her given name and hence the structure and meaning of her character.

By restoring Desdemona's voice, Morrison gives her the opportunity to tell a different story — "I exist in places where I can speak, at last, words that in earth life were sealed or twisted into the language of obedience" (1.14) — to create a narrative of her identity that focuses on "my interior

life" (2.17). In *Othello*, the deferred declaration of disobedience is associated with Emilia, who with increasing urgency insists on speaking: "'Tis proper I obey him but not now" (5.2.203). Emilia's outspoken defiance of her husband fills the vacuum left by Desdemona's refusal fully to confront Othello. In Morrison's play, Desdemona sets out to question "obedience" (1.14) from the very beginning. Given this agenda, Desdemona embarks on a stunning revision of the Shakespearean precedent.

The principal means by which Desdemona gains access to a new mode of expression is through a sequence of increasingly intense woman-to-woman conversations that Morrison stages. The first of these encounters, which establishes a model for the ones to follow, involves two characters who are mentioned only in passing and make no appearance in Shakespeare's drama. We are thus hearing their voices for the first time. Morrison visualizes a manifestly uncomfortable meeting between Desdemona's and Othello's mothers. In their brief moment, the two women reach a modest accommodation by contemplating the "way of cleansing" (5.27) recommended by Soun, whom we later learn is "a root woman" who "adopted me [Othello] as her son" (6.31). This "cleansing" holds a tentative promise of consolation: "We build an altar to the spirits who are waiting to console us" (5.27). What specific form this consolatory gesture might take is left to subsequent encounters in sections 8 and 9 to work out in greater detail. But in section 5, the prospect of female collaboration has been broached.

This moment initiates the theme of transformation. The shift in focus from the graves of Othello and Desdemona to the building of an altar in their memory suggests that the outcome of their story is not fixed but mutable, still in play: a different ending is possible. In addition, this meeting of the mothers symbolically indicates that cultural mixing is not a problem but a positive resource when it enables the flexibility to occupy multiple vantage points and to attain a more far-reaching, broader world view.

The second exchange between Desdemona and Emilia is more sustained and more argumentative, beginning with the air-clearing sarcasm of Emilia's greeting — "Well, well. If it isn't the martyr of Venice" (8.42). Emilia rebuffs Desdemona's assumption that they have a friendship of equals by insisting on her difference as "a servant" (8.43) and as an orphan: "It's not the same. An orphan knows how quickly love can be withdrawn" (8.44). The conversation intimates the self-examination that Desdemona must undergo in order to arrive at a position where she is capable of remaking her sense of herself.

The striking tonal shift in Emilia's concluding image of the lizard that sheds "her dull outer skin" to reveal "her jeweled self" (8.44) signals the hope for a new self-image and self-awareness. The shedding of the old comes from within: "No one helped her; she did it by herself" (8.44). As

Emilia puts it in her final metaphoric sentence, "That little lizard changed my life" (8.44). This visionary model belongs not only to Emilia but also implicitly serves as inspiration for Desdemona.

The third encounter, which is also the longest and most elaborate, immediately follows in the next section when Desdemona talks with Barbary, who explicitly identifies herself as "black-skinned" (9.45). The moment is heightened to the level of climactic impact because Barbary, who never actually appears in Shakespeare's play, is granted the power of speech and is elevated to a major onstage role. The part is further enhanced by having it performed by Rokia Traoré, the Malian singer who collaborated with Morrison in creating the production. The African woman missing from Shakespeare at last takes the stage.

Unlike Desdemona, Barbary has been renamed, so that her original African name, Sa'ran, marks her non-Shakespearean reality. The meaning of her alternate name is "joy," which contrasts sharply with the continuation of misery signified by the name Desdemona. Joy opens up the possibility of a shift in a new direction (Kitts 2011, 10). Again, the encounter begins with Barbary/Sa'ran throwing cold water on Desdemona's enthusiastic claim of their shared experience — "We shared nothing" — and strongly registering the difference in their status — "I was your slave" (9.45). Sa'ran's assertiveness brings us back, with a new perspective, to Desdemona's reminiscences at the beginning: "My solace in those early days lay with my nurse, Barbary . . . She tended me as though she were my birth mother" (2.18). Sa'ran demonstrates the other, negative, side of this "solace."

In a further twist, however, as the earlier reference to "willow trees" (2.18) prompts, Desdemona's initial account returns us also to the problematic model that Barbary's submission bequeathed to Desdemona: "Yet that same heart, wide as it was, proved vulnerable. When I needed her most, she stumbled under the spell of her lover" (2.18). The preliminary skirmishing over, their shared problem now resurfaces: "And your lover slaughtered you as surely as if he had strangled you. Remember the song you sang every day until you wasted away and embraced death without fight or protest?" (9.46). Although it is unclear whether Barbary's lover is located in Africa or Venice and whether we should imagine him as black or white, the immediacy of Desdemona's account makes it seem as though she witnessed the entire event as having taken place in Venice.

Sa'ran responds by simultaneously repeating and renouncing the willow song that Desdemona had learned from her and had recited prior to her own death at Othello's hands (*Othello* 4.3.38-55). This is the play's turning point because, at the point of closest conjunction with Shakespeare, Morrison steers clear by having Sa'ran sing a different song that displaces the one inherited from *Othello*. In Sa'ran's preface, the turn and the rejection are explicit: "No more 'willow.' Afterlife is time and with time there is change. My song is new:" (9.48, original punctuation).

The sequential placement of sections 8 and 9 emphasizes their structural parallel. Both present a contrast between old and new. Both stress the motif of change, whether in Emilia's "That lizard changed my life" (8.44) or Sa'ran's "with time is change" (9.48). At the authorial level, these terms speak to Morrison's metaphorical relationship to Shakespeare. *Othello* is the old song to *Desdemona* conceived as the new song that brings change. Morrison's artistic reflexiveness is particularly notable with regard to the old skin that the lizard sloughs off but does not discard: "she did not leave the outer one behind. She dragged it with her" (8.44). The express purpose of Morrison's intervention is to disrupt and change the legacy of *Othello*, but her project also acknowledges a respect for Shakespeare's work through the image of the retention of the old skin.

Sa'ran's new song, "Someone leans near" (9.49), is written by Toni Morrison, but not new to her, for it appeared as the third poem in her *Five Poems*, published ten years before, with each poem accompanied by a black silhouette work created by the African American artist Kara Walker (Morrison 2002).⁶ Since Morrison has altered slightly the original version for use in *Desdemona*, I pause here to summarize the modifications. For *Desdemona*, Morrison replaces the second-person "you" address with the first-person "I" to create a more immediate, intimate effect. Word changes are also inserted in two of the poem's sixteen lines. The more dramatic "sudden" is added to "Then on my skin a sudden breath caresses" (Morrison 2002, line 11) and the penultimate line 15, "Once more you know," becomes the far more vivid "What bliss to know." In both cases, the result is more emphatic. In particular, "bliss" stands out as a carry-over from the fourth poem, "It Comes Unadorned," where the revelation of the referent of the repeated "It" is deferred to the next-to-last line, which contains the single word "Bliss."

The existence of the earlier version of "Someone leans near" raises the question of whether Morrison was thinking about *Othello* in the 2002 poem. The question may be unanswerable, but it is worth noting that the phrase "the salt your tears have shed," which appears in both lines 2 and 12 of the original poem, as well as in *Desdemona* (9.49), corresponds to "Her salt tears" in Shakespeare's willow song: "Her salt tears fell from her and softened the stones" (*Othello* 4.3.44; *Desdemona* 9.47). In addition, the entire poem may be associated with a Desdemona who "waits, longing to hear / Words of reason, love or play" but hears none — only "a fury in the words" (*Othello* 4.2.34); a Desdemona who herself is at a loss for words — "Silence kneads your fear"; and a Desdemona who is immobilized and defenseless, with no way out — "You shore up your heart to run. To stay. / But no sign or design marks the narrow way." Finally, the pivot point of the poem's "Then on your skin a breath caresses" may identify Othello as the "someone who leans near" when he "smells thee on the tree" (*Othello*, 5.2.15) as he pauses in the act of "plucking her rose" and killing Desdemona.

It is also appropriate to consider Morrison's previous collaboration with Kara Walker, whose style can be seen as a felicitous critical match for the grotesqueness of what Morrison calls the "murderous silence" (8.42) in Shakespeare's *Othello*. In particular, Walker's illustration for the poem "Someone leans near" shows a huge raptor hovering above the precariously exposed and pinned woman, with "YOU" incised in large letters down the front of her naked torso, by which the bird has staked his claim on the woman's body. If we imagine the raptor as an emblem for Othello and the upside-down woman as Desdemona, Walker offers a brilliantly apt, ironic image for the intertwined fates of the two Shakespearean characters, an image suggestive of the prelude to murder at the opening of the play's final scene.

In the context of *Desdemona*, "Someone leans near" represents "change" (9.48) by releasing the grip of tragedy. The positive tone of the last two lines suggests that death is not the end but rather symbolizes a new start: "What bliss to know / I will never die again" (9.49). Desdemona joins and ratifies the final note of Sa'ran's song by transforming her first-person singular "I" into the collective "we": "We will never die again" (9.49). This choric refrain conveys a shared resolution in which the two women, and by extension all women, potentially participate. Since "We will never die again" is the final sentence in the entire section, the statement commands attention. By contrast, Desdemona's corresponding "we" formulation in the context of her relationship with Othello at the end of the drama — "We will be judged by how well we love" (10.56) — is far more provisional. Here, with Sa'ran, Desdemona's culmination cannot be gainsaid but stands affirmed.

War and Peace

The two biggest surprises in Morrison's play are intertwined: Othello's revelation about his "mutual pleasure" in the twin rapes that he and Iago coordinated in section 7 is matched and answered by Desdemona's counter-confession. Her startling renunciation of Othello's military identity is held back until the final section:

I am sick of killing as a solution. It solves
nothing. Questions nothing, produces
nothing, nothing, but more of itself. You
thought war was alive, had honor and
reason. I tell you it is well beyond all that.
My mistake was believing that you hated
war as much as I did. You believed I loved
Othello the warrior. I did not. (10.54)

If Desdemona's eloquent disclosure sounds out of context, this is a vivid sign of the re-vision with which Morrison has decisively altered the context.

Against Othello's profession of war, Desdemona concludes by presenting herself as a proponent of "human peace" (10.56). The contrast and disparity produce a gap that is too wide to be bridged. The hypothetical ideal reunion of Othello and Desdemona in section 10 cannot compete with the combined force of the immediately preceding sections 8 and 9, where the alternative world of female bonds with Emilia and Barbary/Sa'ran replace the male bonding offered in secret by Othello.

As their conversation proceeds, Othello follows the same pattern of critique as in the women's examples. Yet Othello's attempt to criticize Desdemona feels flat and unconvincing: "You never loved me. You fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner who kills for the State . . . What excited you was my strange story" (10.50-51). Othello's indulgence in self-pity and his absence of self-awareness are conspicuous. In his courtship of Desdemona, Othello himself played up and exploited an exoticized self-presentation: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (*Othello* 1.3.166-67). As the crucial second line indicates, Othello is fully complicit in this process. Yet he takes no responsibility for his part in their reciprocal exchange. Rather, pursuing the course of self-extenuation, he tries to place the blame entirely on Desdemona, who rightly speaks out against Othello's predictable, self-serving tack: "You are wrong!" (10.51).

In the new world of *Desdemona*, Othello's final line consists of four anxious, compressed questions — "And now? Together? Alone? Is it too late?" (10.55) — that ring hollow when met with Desdemona's confident rejoinder: "'Late' has no meaning here. Here there is only the possibility of wisdom" (10.55). Implicit in her response is the assertion that they have not yet achieved this "wisdom." The overriding ambiguity of Othello's interrogative juxtaposition of "together" with the word "alone" also registers the distance that separates them. Othello is burdened by working with past assumptions, while Desdemona has moved on. After this point, Othello fades from view and arguably disappears from the text: there are no further speech prefixes designating Othello. Desdemona takes over and acts as though alone for the remainder of the performance. The scope is expansive rather than Othello-focused. Othello's capacity for a new understanding beyond Shakespeare cannot keep up with Desdemona's development, as represented here by Morrison.

With Othello having become at best a bystander, Desdemona speaks about her own vision of "passionate peace": "And if we haven't secured the passionate peace we yearn for, it is because we haven't imagined it" (10.56). The "we" in the subsequent lyrics seems all-encompassing, rather than specific to Othello. The final appeal to a cross-racial "working together" moves in Sa'ran's direction: "Whether we are from the same place or not. / Whether we are from the same culture or

not" (10.56). In this context, the twice-repeated line "It would fill me with joy" (10.56) points to Barbary, whose rechristening as Sa'ran animates the invocation of joy.

In conclusion, I turn to two observations by Toni Morrison with regard to *Desdemona*. First, Morrison refers to Shakespeare's *Othello* as an Africanist conception (Morrison 1992; Sellars, Morrison, et al. 2011).⁷ In a response to Darieck Scott, Morrison applies the term Africanist to Othello (at about 1:34) when she comments on the presentation of his character "not as a complicated human being but as a kind of male Africanist black warrior symbol of something" (Sellars, Morrison, et al. 2011). Opposed to this reductive version, Morrison allows that "there is another Othello that he does not let anyone see except Desdemona. And she recognizes this other person, who may or may not be the classic powerful killing machine that he is understood to be by everyone else." Yet the phrase "may or may not be" preserves an ambiguity. The play raises the issue of whether there is an authorial imprint inherited from Shakespeare that makes Othello's character an impervious structure and limits its depth. The answer remains an open question. Shakespeare's fashioning of Othello "may not" lend itself to refashioning. Perhaps, then, the lesson of this project is that the restricted boundaries of Othello's character are intractable, making it impossible fully to transform and to reinvent the Othello figure as constructed by Shakespeare's play. This may help to explain why Morrison found it more fruitful to explore the possibilities for Barbary as an undefined and thus not yet permanently fixed character.

Second, Morrison downplays the seemingly mandatory themes of forgiveness and redemption by stating her purpose more simply: "The whole thing is about the acquisition of knowledge . . . it's not necessarily even about reconciliation . . . it's finally knowing more" (Sellars, Morrison, et al. 2011, 1:06). For Morrison, understanding need not automatically lead to or guarantee reconciliation. Instead, we should value understanding for its own sake. *Desdemona* deliberately withholds a happy ending: we should not expect the tragic elevation of Othello, the magical reconstruction of the Othello-Desdemona relationship, or our validation as kind-hearted spectators. Instead, Morrison takes us outside the Shakespearean comfort zone into the stark exploratory world of critical re-vision toward which Adrienne Rich points. The austere, even harsh, approach of Toni Morrison's response to *Othello* in her *Desdemona* strikes me as an edifyingly productive stance and a noble cause.

Notes

1. In chronological order, these include: Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* in "Contextualizing *Othello*" and "Respeaking Othello in Fred Wilson's *Speak of Me as I Am*," both in *Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art* (Erickson 2007a, 111-17 and

- Erickson 2007b, 119-50); "Casting for Racial Harmony: Strategies of Redemption in Caeen Sennette Jennings's Double Play" (Erickson 2009); Phillip Hayes Dean's *Paul Robeson* in "Black Characters in Search of an Author: Black Plays on Black Performers of Shakespeare" (Erickson 2010); "'Othello's Back': Othello as Mock Tragedy in Rita Dove's *Sonata Mulattica*" (Erickson 2011); "Mining Shakespeare: Fred Wilson's Visual Translations of *Othello*" (Erickson 2013a), and my commentary on *Othello* itself, written for a Shakespeare Association of America seminar in 2010 without knowledge of Morrison's *Desdemona* (Erickson 2013b).
2. In an interview with Elaine Sciolino, Toni Morrison notes the interdependence of Shakespeare's work and her own: *Desdemona* "would be more fulfilling for the viewer if she or he had read 'Othello'" (Sciolino 2011).
 3. Citations of *Othello* come from *The Norton Shakespeare*, second edition (Shakespeare 2008).
 4. *Desdemona* (London: Oberon Books, 2012) consists of ten sections or "scenes." Citations refer to the section number, followed by the page. Valuable supplements to the text are the videos of two events at the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities at Berkeley in conjunction with the U.S. premiere of *Desdemona* at Cal Performances. The first is a lecture by Peter Sellars, director of *Desdemona* (Sellars 2011). The second is an extended discussion among the three collaborators, Peter Sellars, Toni Morrison, Rokia Traoré, with contributions by three faculty members (Abdul JanMohamed, Tamara Roberts, and Darieck Scott) (Sellars, Morrison, et al. 2011).
 5. For Othello's final speech, see Berger 2013, 228-29.
 6. In an email dated 22 January 2003, Morrison's assistant René Boatman confirmed that Morrison wrote these poems without having seen in advance Kara Walker's accompanying illustrations (Boatman 2003). For Walker's art, see Walker 2007.
 7. For a discussion of Africanism in literature, see Morrison 1992.

Permissions

Figures 1-2. Photo Credit: Peter DaSilva/Cal Performances.

Figures 3-9. Photo Credit: Pascal Victor/ArtComArt.

References

- Berger, Harry. 2013. *A Fury in the Words: Love and Embarrassment in Shakespeare's Venice*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Boatman, René. 2003. Email message to Peter Erickson. 22 January.
- Erickson, Peter. 2013a. "Mining Shakespeare: Fred Wilson's Visual Translations of *Othello*." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 33 (forthcoming).
- Erickson, Peter. 2013b. "Race Words in *Othello*." In *Shakespeare and Immigration*. Edited by Ruben Espinosa and David Ruiter. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. 159-76.
- Erickson, Peter. 2011. "'Othello's Back': *Othello* as Mock Tragedy in Rita Dove's *Sonata Mulattica*." *JNT* 41.3: 362-77.
- Erickson, Peter. 2010. "Black Characters in Search of an Author: Black Plays on Black Performers of Shakespeare." In *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*. Edited by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson. New York: Palgrave. 223-32.
- Erickson, Peter. 2009. "Casting for Racial Harmony: Strategies of Redemption in Calleen Sinnette Jennings's Double Play." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27.3: 415-23.
- Erickson, Peter. 2007a. "Contextualizing *Othello*." In *Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art*. New York: Palgrave. 103-17.
- Erickson, Peter. 2007b. "Respeaking *Othello* in Fred Wilson's *Speak of Me as I Am*." In *Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art*. New York: Palgrave. 119-50.
- Kitts, Lenore. 2011. "Reviving Desdemona." *Townsend Newsletter*. 9-10. <http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/publications/septemberoctober-2011/> [accessed 20 September 2013].
- Morrison, Toni. 2012. *Desdemona*. London: Oberon Books.
- Morrison, Toni. 2002. *Five Poems*. Las Vegas: Rainmaker Editions, 2002.
- Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1979. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision (1971)." In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: Norton. 33-49.
- Sciolino, Elaine. 2011. "'Desdemona' Talks Back to 'Othello'." *New York Times*. 25 October. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/26/arts/music/toni-morrison-desdemona-and-peter-sellarss-othello.html> [accessed 20 September 2013].
- Sears, Djanet. 1997. *Harlem Duet*. Toronto: Scirocco Drama.

- Sellars, Peter. 2011. "Desdemona Takes the Microphone: Toni Morrison and Shakespeare's Hidden Women." 27 October. Available online: <http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/media/peter-sellars-director-desdemona/> [accessed 20 September 2013].
- Sellars, Peter, and Toni Morrison, Rokia Traoré, Abdul JanMohamed, Tamara Roberts, and Darieck Scott. 2011. "Desdemona: Dialogues Across Histories, Continents, Cultures." 28 October. Available online: <http://townsendcenter.berkeley.edu/media/desdemona-dialogues-across-histories-continents-cultures/> [accessed 20 September 2013].
- Shakespeare, William. 2008. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. Second edition. New York: Norton.
- Walker, Kara. 2007. *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. Edited by Philippe Vergne, Sander Gilman, et al. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center.