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“Nobody—I Myself”: The Feminine Self in Shakespearean Tragedy and Romance

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of the
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And therefore, like a cipher,
 Yet standing in rich place, I multiply
 With one 'We thank you' many thousands more
 That go before it.

(*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.6-9)

Prologue

In the book *Representing Shakespeare*¹, Murray Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn call attention to Shakespeare's fascination with extremes. In *Romeo and Juliet*², for example, the author creates conflicts by bringing together lovers from two opposing households while "temp'ring extremities with extreme sweet" (*Romeo and Juliet* Act II, Prologue). In *Othello*³, the stark contrast between black and white is established in the opening scene by the image of "an old black ram...tupping your white ewe" (*Othello* 1.1.85-86). Drama is thus made possible by the interaction between oppositions that are constantly in the process of colliding and splitting, separating and reuniting. Meanwhile, meanings arise from the conflicts generated by these incompatible polarities.

This thesis explores a particular pair of binary oppositions: the Self and the Other, which is often tied to the dichotomy between the masculine and the feminine. In her influential book *Comic Women, Tragic Men*⁴, Linda Bamber observes that Shakespearean tragedy usually begins with a misfortune that fills the tragic hero's heart with self-doubt. He then associates the unpredictability of fortune with the inconsistency of women, calling the goddess of fortune a "strumpet" (*Hamlet*⁵ 2.2.504) as he projects his self-hatred onto women. Thus, misfortune leads to misogyny as the man falls from the simple world of masculinity into the confusing realm of female sexuality. Moreover, the misfortune then sends the tragic hero off on a journey in which he searches for his own identity and redefines manhood. Therefore, Bamber argues that Shakespearean tragedy centers on the masculine Self; that is, the fulcrum of the play is indeed the progression of masculine selfhood. While the masculine is actively seeking and evolving, the feminine, by contrast, remains a static background for the transformation of the masculine Self. Bamber thus proposes the concept of the feminine Other in Shakespearean tragedy. Without the

privilege of the Self, the sexual Other serves as a reliable reference point for the ever-changing masculine identity.

This thesis, however, proposes the idea of the feminine Self in Shakespearean tragedy and romance. I agree with Bamber that the feminine is rarely the central focus of Shakespearean tragedy and the tragic heroines usually stand in contrast to the tragic heroes. Nevertheless, I argue that the feminine is never a static background; in fact, feminine selfhood has its own complexities. The feminine Self shows as much transformation as the masculine Self, although the changes it goes through are subtler and thus require more careful examination. Personally, I am fascinated by Shakespeare's tragic heroines, whose tender passions and unfulfilled dreams often move me to tears. However, I am saddened by the fact that, overshadowed by the male characters, these female characters receive much less attention than they deserve. In productions, they are often treated as pieces of dramatic mechanism, whereas in criticism, they are usually thought of as abstract symbols instead of individual characters. The marginalization of the feminine is perhaps due to the very same perception of female characters as lacking selfhood and the capacity for change. This thesis therefore seeks to humanize the heroines by placing greater emphasis on the psychology of the feminine Self than on the symbolic meaning of femininity.

This thesis examines the psychology of the feminine Self through the lens of psychoanalytic theories. By moving "downward and backward, toward unconscious and infantile actions" (Schwartz 21), psychoanalysis addresses some of the root issues in human development, which are ubiquitous in the dramatic works of Shakespeare. Highly influenced by Janet Adelman's psychoanalytic reading of Shakespeare's plays, this thesis pays particular attention to the issues surrounding female sexuality in Shakespearean tragedy and romance. This thesis expands upon the concept of the contaminating maternal body, which Janet Adelman discusses at

length in her book *Suffocating Mothers*⁶. To be specific, this thesis examines the source of the male fear of female sexuality, that is, the perceived connection between female sexuality and death.

Therefore, this thesis analyzes the psyche of the feminine Self through exploring the dynamics between the masculine and the feminine as well as the dialogue between the Self and the Other. This thesis tells the stories of the feminine Self by following three Shakespearean heroines—Ophelia, Desdemona, and Hermione—on their individual journeys of transformation. In addition, based on the premise that feminine selfhood and masculine selfhood are defined in relation to each other, this thesis thus looks at the female characters in relation to their male counterparts—Hamlet, Othello, and Leontes.

Chapter 1 seeks to make sense of Ophelia's sudden madness and her tragic death in the context of Hamlet's tragedy. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare establishes the association between female sexuality and death through juxtaposing the mother's wedding with the father's funeral. The sexualized female body thus becomes the "unweeded garden" (*Hamlet* 1.2.135) that breeds corruption and death. Shaken by the tragic events that unfold around her, the young and vulnerable Ophelia develops a certain understanding of her own sexuality, which brings her anguish and despair, and eventually leads to the fragmentation of her selfhood.

Disgusted at female sexuality, Hamlet abandons the idea of romantic love as he envisions a sanctified world with "no more marriage" (*Hamlet* 3.1.149-150). *Hamlet* thus raises an important question: is love possible in the world of Shakespearean tragedy, where female sexuality is linked so closely to sin and death? This question also gives rise to the central conflict in *Othello*. Othello's last lines are poignant yet strangely beautiful:

I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

(*Othello* 5.2.354-355)

The image of dying upon a kiss seems to suggest the reconciliation between the masculine and the feminine, which then leads to the reacceptance of romance. The reunion of lovers, however, is achieved only through death. The ending of the play thus simultaneously undoes and redoes the association between sexuality and death. Chapter 2 therefore examines the paradox around love and death in *Othello*. The purpose of this chapter is hence to understand the “cause” (*Othello* 5.2.1) of Desdemona’s death. Specifically, this chapter makes an effort to address the unresolved issue with regard to her controversial last line as she takes blame on herself for her death: “Nobody—I myself” (*Othello* 5.2.1). This line astonishingly erases the boundary between the Self and the Other. In *Othello*, the Self and the Other constantly collapse into each other as the distinction between masculinity and femininity become ambiguous. This chapter discusses what it means to be the feminine Self in the tragic world ruled by conflict, confusion, and chaos.

As previously mentioned, *Othello* ends with a moment of illumination as Othello and Desdemona “die upon a kiss.” Centered upon this revelation, *The Winter’s Tale*⁷ makes the extraordinary transition from tragedy to romance. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare breaks the association between female sexuality and death, while celebrating the feminine power of creation and recreation. Chapter 3 thus turns to Hermione, the mother in this play who embodies female generativity. In that sense, Hermione is antithetical to Gertrude, whose sexualized maternal body evokes death. Shakespeare’s moving away from Gertrude to Hermione also indicates the realization that sin originates not from female sexuality *per se*, but from the male fear of female sexuality, which, in this play, leads to destruction and annihilation. Moreover, love is also redefined in this play as a concept that encompasses not only heterosexual romance, but also female kinship, which is represented by the intimate connection between the mother and her

daughter. Therefore, this chapter also calls attention to the relationship between Hermione and Perdita, which stands in contrast to the kind of romantic love portrayed in Shakespearean tragedy.

In short, this thesis examines the representation of the feminine Self in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*, while paying special attention to the complicated issues surrounding female sexuality. In the process of addressing these issues, this thesis also discusses in detail the interplay between the masculine and the feminine, which is linked to the intricate relationship between the Self and the Other.

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“A Document in Madness”: The Tragic Transformation of the Feminine Self in *Hamlet*¹

In his essay “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*,” Jacques Lacan² rather disparagingly refers to Ophelia as “that piece of bait” (Lacan 11). In the play, Ophelia indeed serves as the bait in the trap set for Hamlet. Perhaps in some sense, she is also the bait, or the “metal” (3.2.112) that attracts the reader’s attention to Hamlet as well as *Hamlet*. Yet simply considering Ophelia a piece of bait or a means to an end does not do her justice. Ophelia herself deserves more attention than she has received. This lack of recognition is in part due to the ambiguity surrounding her character, which makes telling her story a difficult task. Present in “only five of the play’s twenty scenes” (Showalter 2), Ophelia rarely has the chance to express herself in the way that other characters in *Hamlet* do. She is therefore covered with so many layers of mystery. Ophelia enters the play, bringing along with her a question: “what is between you?” (1.3.98)—what is Ophelia’s relationship with Hamlet like before the tragedy begins? This question never gets fully addressed, and yet is soon followed by another question: is Ophelia “the very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy” (2.2.49)? Is there truth in Polonius’s seemingly ridiculous hypothesis? Somehow the attempt to understand Ophelia becomes the pursuit of truth. Her father demands that she should “give...up the truth” (1.3.98) and claims that he will “find where truth is hid” (2.2.57-58). However, the truth about Ophelia’s story is further obscured when she descends into madness. “Divided from herself and her fair judgment” (4.5.85), she becomes alienated from her true being. When she does express them, she “speaks things in doubt / that carry but half sense” (4.5.6-7). “Her speech is nothing” (4.5.7), yet this “nothing” seems to indicate something, but before anyone could possibly decipher the meaning of it, she buries the truth deep in her grave, and, in her silent sleep, refuses to give further insight into her mind. “That piece of bait” thus becomes that piece of the puzzle.

Many critics have offered their own readings of Ophelia. Lacan describes the play “the drama of Hamlet as the man who has lost the way of his desire” (Lacan 12), while considering Ophelia the object of Hamlet’s desire. Hamlet is said to lose his desire for Ophelia when he does not fall into her trap. Later, Hamlet finds his desire for Ophelia again only after she dies. Lacan observes:

Then, suddenly, the object regains its immediacy and its worth for him...only insofar as the object of Hamlet’s desire has become an impossible object can it become once more the object of his desire.

(Lacan 36)

Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia reflects the changing status of his own desire; he first loses his desire, then reestablishes a connection with it. However, Ophelia as the object of desire is not the maker but the bearer of this change. Like the bait, she stays absolutely motionless in one place; it is up to the “fish” to decide whether to move closer or farther away from the bait. In fact, the substantial change only occurs after Ophelia loses all her agency as a character and becomes entirely an object—an immobile body. As the object of male desire, “Ophelia is obviously essential,” but only in the sense that “she is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet” (Lacan 20).

Lacan’s analysis of Ophelia resonates with Linda Bamber’s idea of the feminine Other. In her book *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, Bamber³ argues that in Shakespearean tragedy, the feminine Other, being relatively stable and unchanging, serves as a static background, or a reliable reference point for the ongoing transformation of the masculine Self. Ophelia as the feminine Other in *Hamlet* shows no capacity to change. She is always what she is— “as chaste as ice, as pure as snow” (3.1.137-138). What changes is Hamlet’s perception of her; he sees her first as the Madonna, then as the Whore, and then as the Madonna again. Ophelia herself neither

causes nor responds to this change. In some sense, Ophelia serves as the passive observer of the tragedy.

As one would expect, feminist critics have not been satisfied with the representation of Ophelia as the object or the Other. Elaine Showalter⁴ finds Lacan's reading of Ophelia particularly disappointing:

[Lacan] goes on for some 41 pages to speak about Hamlet, and when he does mention Ophelia, she is merely what Lacan calls "the object Ophelia"—that is, the object of Hamlet's male desire.

(Showalter 1)

The responsibility of feminist criticism, Showalter suggests, is to bring Ophelia from the background to the foreground and tell her story, which has been neglected by male critics. One way to do so is to explore the symbolic meanings of Ophelia; specifically, Showalter chooses to focus on the cultural connection between female sexuality and female insanity as symbolized by Ophelia. Through examining the representation of Ophelia on stage, in art, and in criticism, Showalter offers her own interpretation of Ophelia as the archetype of the oppressed young woman whose expression of sexuality is closely associated with female insanity.

Showalter's feminist approach differs radically from Lacan's and Bamber's readings of Ophelia in that Showalter focuses directly on Ophelia. According to Showalter, Ophelia may be a "minor character" (Showalter 1) in *Hamlet*, but is by no means secondary. Instead of seeing Ophelia as part of Hamlet's story, feminist critics should tell Ophelia's own story. "Unlike Lacan," Showalter emphasizes, "when we [feminist critics] promise to speak about her, we make good our word" (Showalter 9). However, in spite of Showalter's effort to bring Ophelia to the foreground, her interpretation of Ophelia as the impersonal symbol deprives Ophelia of the privilege of the Self. When Ophelia becomes the Woman who represents all women, she is no longer a woman with selfhood. Moreover, the changing representation of Ophelia, as outlined in

Showalter's essay, reflects the evolving attitude towards women and madness, not the transformation of Ophelia as a character. Embodying the connection between female sexuality and insanity, Ophelia herself does not change. Her constancy as the symbol allows Showalter to examine the evolution of culture over time. In that sense, how is the symbol really different from the object or the Other whose stability sets the stage for the variability of the Self? In Showalter's essay, Western culture is the Self that actively progresses, whereas Ophelia, despite being the center of attention, still remains in the background as the feminine Other.

I believe that the "responsibility of feminist criticism" is to elevate Ophelia from the feminine Other to the feminine Self, that is, to treat Ophelia first as an individual woman—a character with subjectivity, instead of reducing her to the unfeeling object, the unchanging Other, or the inhuman symbol. An important distinction should be made here: to think of Ophelia as the feminine Self in *Hamlet* is not to center the play on Ophelia. Bamber criticizes some feminist critics for making the feminine Other the center of Shakespearean tragedy:

Many feminists, however, go so far as to claim that the Self is feminine even in literature by men... Such criticism refuses to accept the Otherness of the feminine even in the consciousness of individual men. This, I think, is a mistake... Feminist criticism fights a losing battle when it tries to center the work of men on the feminine Self.

(Bamber 11)

Bamber points out that the fulcrum of the male imagination is always the transformation of masculine selfhood; the feminine, by contrast, plays the role of the Other with a "fixed identity" (Bamber 12). "The feminine in Shakespeare," Bamber emphasizes, "is always something unlike and external to the Self, who is male" (Bamber 4). Moreover, the feminine contradicts yet also complements the masculine. The play itself is essentially the ongoing dialogue between the masculine Self and the feminine Other. Bamber argues that falsely attributing qualities of the masculine Self to the feminine Other disrupts this dialogue between the Self and the Other, and

eventually alters the meaning of the tragedy. For example, Bamber discusses Carol Thomas Neely⁵'s argument in "Women and Men in *Othello*: 'What should such a fool / Do with so good a woman?'" Bamber writes:

Neely's reading implies that we are to center the play on sanity, on Emilia, on the feminine. If we do, Othello is exasperating, his story tedious, and his death good riddance to bad rubbish.

(Bamber 13)

In response to Bamber's theory, I would like to elaborate on what I mean by the notion of the feminine Self. I consider the feminine Self a third possibility that stands in between the feminine Other and the masculine Self. In Shakespearean tragedy, some female characters do exemplify characteristics of the Self; these characteristics are distinctively feminine, which differentiates the feminine Self from the masculine Self. These two types of selfhood may coexist in the play. Therefore, acknowledging the existence of the feminine Self does not necessarily make the feminine the center of the play. What exactly are the characteristics of the feminine Self? Like the masculine Self, the feminine Self shows the capacity to change as well, although her transformation is much more implicit compared to the tragic hero's psychological journey which is often made explicit by his soliloquies. Moreover, the masculine Self progresses actively; he may struggle against the "harsh world" (5.2.349) or his own limitations, yet he is motivated by an intrinsic desire to change, to reorder the world, and to transcend his old identity. By contrast, the feminine Self is characterized by a kind of passivity. The tragic heroine does not seek changes—she is changed. That is, the pressure to change is often imposed upon her. Such forced transformation often leads to some tragic outcome because the change itself is unwanted, and its consequence unfortunate. In Shakespearean tragedy, feminine selfhood is defined and redefined in relation to its masculine counterpart and goes through constant changes in response to external events.

In this chapter, I will illustrate the concept of the feminine Self in Shakespearean tragedy using Ophelia as an example. To be specific, unlike Showalter who sees Ophelia as the symbolic representation of female sexuality, I would like to explore how Ophelia's own understanding of female sexuality changes over time—as a result of Hamlet's altered perception of female sexuality. Given the relational nature of feminine selfhood, it makes more sense to analyze Ophelia in relation to Hamlet, the masculine Self in this play, than to focus solely on Ophelia. I will pay special attention to the significant event—the murder of her father by her lover—which triggers Ophelia's tragic transformation, namely, her descent into madness. Although the purpose of this chapter is to tell Ophelia's story, I find it necessary to include the analysis of Hamlet's view of female sexuality as well, since throughout the play, Ophelia is constantly under the influence of Hamlet. Moreover, her own psychology is sometimes obscure and elusive, while Hamlet's explicitly stated opinions often shed light on Ophelia's implicitly expressed ideas. Therefore, interpreting Ophelia with the help of Hamlet allows one to “by indirections find directions out” (2.1.66).

Although very little is known about the pre-play romance between Hamlet and Ophelia, Hamlet's love poem does provide some insight into their previous relationship. He writes:

To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia... In her excellent white bosom...

(2.2.109-110,113)

The poem calls attention to “her excellent white bosom,” which evokes the image of the sexualized female body. This body, though sexualized, is not eroticized. It is in fact elevated to the altitude of being “celestial,” almost like a holy “idol.” The surpassing excellence of this “idol” elicits feelings of admiration and love. The poem ends with an emphasis on the steadfastness of his love for Ophelia— “never doubt I love” (2.2.119). The power of his love

allows Hamlet to sublimate sexuality into something spiritual. The poem suggests that initially Hamlet holds a rather positive attitude towards sexuality and tends to associate sexuality with a kind of love that transforms the mundane into the divine.

As the recipient of Hamlet's love poem, Ophelia, being young and impressionable—in that sense “a baby” (1.3.105) indeed—embraces Hamlet's philosophy of love and sexuality. Like Hamlet, Ophelia idealizes her lover. She sees Hamlet as her “soul's idol” and paints a glorified portrait of him:

The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mold of form,
Th' observed of all observers...

(3.1.154-157)

This sense of awe and admiration for the love object leads to the elevation of their love. When Laertes trivializes Hamlet's passion for Ophelia by describing it as:

A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute.
No more.

(1.3.7-10)

Ophelia answers with disbelief: “No more but so?” (1.3.10). Polonius debases their relationship even more harshly than Laertes. He sees it as a scandalous affair that may potentially disgrace his daughter and hence his entire household: “Tend'ring it thus you'll tender me a fool” (1.3.109). Polonius hints at the possibility that Ophelia may foolishly let “her chaste treasure open” (1.3.31) and thus become pregnant with a baby. His concern comes from his belief that “these tenders” (1.3.106) are not the expression of love, but the indication of lust. In response to her father's accusations, Ophelia defends her relationship with Hamlet by calling it “love / In honorable fashion” (1.3.110-111) and glorifying it with “the holy vows of heaven” (1.3.114).

Like Hamlet, she emphasizes the divine nature of their love. Even though elements of sexuality are always present in their romance, both Hamlet and Ophelia assert that love cannot be corrupted by sexuality, whereas sexuality can be transfigured by love.

Ophelia's idealistic view of love causes her to develop a romantic vision of sexuality. In response to Laertes's "good lesson" (1.3.45) on the importance of chastity, Ophelia says:

But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven
Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And recks not his own rede.

(1.3.46-51)

Ophelia associates chastity with a "steep and thorny way;" although this way leads to "heaven," the traveler has to habituate herself with a hardship sweetened by nothing but some airy promise of the afterlife. Sexuality, by contrast, is compared to "the primrose path"—clearly the more preferable one of the two courses. Her use of flower as a metaphor for sexuality—perhaps female sexuality in particular—establishes the connection between human sexuality and the beauty of nature. "The steep and thorny way" seems unnatural in contrast to the natural beauty of "the primrose path." Furthermore, "the primrose path" may lead to an alternative "heaven," that is, the heaven of this world, of this life, since their love, infused with "heavenly vows," transforms sexuality into "the celestial." In short, influenced by her lover, Ophelia romanticizes sexuality by associating it with a kind of love that transcends the lovers' own limitations as mortals. Although being taught to fear the "danger of desire" (1.3.35), Ophelia's response to her brother's warning: "fear it, Ophelia, fear it" (1.3.33) may as well be: "fear me not" (1.3.51).

However, Ophelia's positive vision of sexuality does not last long; her perception of female sexuality soon suffers a traumatic change caused by Hamlet. Hamlet's own attitude

towards female sexuality alters dramatically as the result of his mother's remarriage soon after his father's death. Hamlet is distressed by the idea that his father is insufficiently mourned because of his mother's "frailty" (1.2.146). This "frailty" springs from her increasing sexual "appetite" (1.2.144) which causes her to "post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (1.2.156-157). Hamlet highlights the animalistic nature of his mother's sexuality by comparing her to "a beast that wants discourse of reason" (1.2.150) while pointing out that even the beast "would have mourned longer" (1.2.151) than his mother. Disgusted with female sexuality, Hamlet no longer sees the female body as "celestial;" in his eyes, the body has lost all its divinity and become the embodiment of depravity. In her book *Suffocating Mothers*, Janet Adelman⁶ draws the parallel between Hamlet's tragedy and the fall. The incestuous union between Gertrude and Claudius transforms Hamlet's world from the Garden of Eden into "an unweeded garden" (1.2.135). Fertilized by the generative power of female sexuality, the garden "grows to seed" (1.2.136), and so contaminates Hamlet's world with "things rank and gross in nature" (1.2.136).

Hamlet's misogyny and disgust at female sexuality reach a new altitude after he encounters the ghost of his father. Ophelia is the first woman he sees after he has been "loosed out of hell" (2.1.83). Hamlet comes to see Ophelia; perhaps he intends to "speak of horrors" (2.1.84), to share his anguish with the person he loves and trusts the most. However, as he stands in front of her, examining her face, he seems to come to the horrific realization that Ophelia is subject to the same kind of "frailty" that corrupts Gertrude. Ophelia, too, is part of the "unweeded garden" and has the capacity to breed "things rank and gross in nature." At this moment, Ophelia and Gertrude collapse into one figure: the "pernicious woman" (1.5.105). Hamlet suffers inwardly as he loses his love object.

He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
 And end his being.

(2.1.94-96)

Hamlet cannot love Ophelia after recognizing in her the presence of female sexuality, as he later declares: “I loved you not” (3.1.119). Although he writes in his letter to Ophelia: “Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him” (2.2.123-124), “this machine” (2.2.123-124) no longer belongs to him—now that he is consumed with the urge for revenge, which ends “his being” and therefore annihilates his love for Ophelia. The extinction of their love, as a result of his realization of the ubiquitous presence of female sexuality, may actually be “the very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy” (2.2.49). Hamlet goes mad as he falls under the shadow of female sexuality, finding himself among “things rank and gross in nature.”

Perceiving Ophelia and Gertrude as “one flesh” (4.3.52) that represents the maternal body, Hamlet sees Ophelia as the future “breeder of sinners” (3.1.122), whose contaminating sexuality will create more “arrant knaves” (3.1.129) like himself. Hamlet expresses a peculiar idea here: “It were better my mother had not borne me” (3.1.123-124). He suggests that his own birth sullies his mother’s body and corrupts the world. Therefore, the only way to restore the purity of the world is to eradicate maternal sexuality. He thus urges Ophelia to go to a “nunnery” (3.1.130), to put an end to the endless cycle of birth and death that fills the world with “things rank and gross in nature.” Hamlet thinks of Ophelia as an embodiment of not only maternal sexuality, but also female sexuality. These two concepts are often used interchangeably, although they show a subtle difference: maternal sexuality threatens the purity of the son, whereas female sexuality jeopardizes the honor of the husband. Hamlet further accuses Ophelia of turning “indifferent honest” (3.1.122) men into “monsters” (3.1.141). He imagines Ophelia cuckolding her future husband—that is, Hamlet himself—in order to feed her own monstrous “appetite”

(1.2.144). Merely thinking about this possibility has made him “mad” (3.1.149). He thus declares that “we will have no more marriage” (3.1.149-150). At this point, Hamlet’s perception of female sexuality has changed completely. The “white bosom” of Ophelia is no longer related to “the celestial” in any way, but has become instead the origin of sin and corruption.

Hamlet’s vision of the “unweeded garden” (1.2.135) shatters Ophelia’s fantasy of “the primrose path” (1.3.150). Deeply disturbed by Hamlet’s insulting speech, Ophelia is unable to hold on to her positive view of sexuality. This positive view also depends entirely on one premise, that is, the transformative power of their love. When this love becomes unavailable to Ophelia, her perception of sexuality, as a result, also alters. Ophelia becomes highly aware of the “danger of desire” (1.3.35), as she says, “truly I do fear it” (2.1.86). She thus behaves like “the chariest maid” (1.3.36) in order to dissociate herself from the concept of female sexuality.

Ham. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Oph. No, my lord.

Ham. I mean, my head upon your lap?

Oph. Ay, my lord.

Ham. Do you think I meant country matters?

Oph. I think nothing, my lord.

Ham. That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.

Oph. What is, my lord?

Ham. Nothing.

(3.2.115-124)

Hamlet’s explicit language— “to lie between maids’ legs”—reduces sexuality to mere carnal desires. The maid is also dehumanized: she appears as her body parts instead of a whole human being. As the phrase “country matters” implies, sexuality is considered vulgar and fallen—especially inappropriate for the lords and ladies of Elsinore. Now perceiving sexuality negatively, Ophelia also gives negative answers to Hamlet’s inquiries. By saying “no” and “nothing,” she hopes to negate the effect of Hamlet’s sexually suggestive language. However,

Hamlet cruelly twists her words, turning “no” into the thought of “country matters” and deliberately misinterpreting “nothing” as the nothingness “between maids’ legs.” He therefore further sexualizes Ophelia, bonding her forever with the contaminating female sexuality which she refuses to be associated with. Unfortunately, her refusal remains unheard. Later, Hamlet violates her again with his language: “It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge” (3.2.255-256).

Moreover, Hamlet turns Ophelia’s “nothing” (3.2.120) into a different “nothing” (3.2.124) which signifies the link between female sexuality and death. The uncanny nothingness represented by the female genitalia also indicates the absolute absence of life, the void left by death. Sensing this implied association between sexuality and death in *Hamlet*, Adelman writes:

The dream logic of this plot-conjunction [of funeral and remarriage] is also reversible; if the father’s death leads to the mother’s sexualized body, the mother’s sexualized body, I will argue, leads to the father’s death.

(Adelman 18)

The “unweeded garden” thus becomes “the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns” (3.1.79-80). The play within the play, *The Mousetrap*, is “a fiction” and hence “a dream of passion” (2.2.562); therefore, it relies on the same kind of dream logic of primary thinking. *The Mousetrap* conveys the very idea that maternal sexuality foreshadows death—specifically, “death of fathers” (1.2.104):

A second time I kill my husband dead
When second husband kisses me in bed.
(3.2.190-191)

The Mousetrap, designed to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.617), is in fact a trap set for the Queen. Lucianus seems a minor role compared to the Player Queen who “doth protest too much” (3.2.236). Trapped in her closet, Gertrude is forced to scrutinize the “black and grained

spots” (3.4.91) in her soul as well as the “bloody deed” (3.4.29) she has committed, that is, to “kill a king, and marry with his brother” (3.4.30). By accepting this accusation against her, Gertrude also accepts the association between female sexuality and death. Hamlet’s words “like daggers” (3.4.96) split Gertrude into two halves: the sexualized and therefore sinful mother and the asexual good mother.

Ger. O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

Ham. O, throw away the worser part of it,

And live the purer with the other half.

(3.4.157-159)

As a result, the sexualized maternal body is executed; as Gertrude says, “I have no life to breathe” (3.4.190)—she only exists as a purified soul without a body. After the closet scene, the real Gertrude is eternally silenced; what lives on is Hamlet’s fantasy of the loving, caring mother of his childhood. This idealized mother is wholeheartedly devoted to her son at the last moment of her life: “No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet!” (5.2.310).

Yet the theme of female sexuality and death does not end with Gertrude’s figurative death. It reemerges in the shape of Ophelia who thinks “nothing” and speaks “nothing.” Throughout the play, Ophelia is often described as “beautiful,” “pretty,” and “fair.” Her beauty brings her the attention and affection of Hamlet:

To the celestial, and my soul’s idol, the most beautified Ophelia... In her excellent white bosom...

(2.2.109-110,113)

As Hamlet’s love poem suggests, in the eyes of the male spectator, Ophelia’s beauty is also linked to female sexuality. “Her excellent white bosom” serves as a symbol of both feminine beauty and female sexuality. Ophelia, however, tries to break the connection between beauty and sexuality by pairing beauty with honesty instead; she suggests: “Could beauty, my lord, have

better commerce than with honesty?" (3.1.109-110). Yet she is soon refuted by Hamlet, who argues that "the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness" (3.1.111-114). In the tragic world of *Hamlet*, which is centered upon the sexualized female body, beauty becomes Ophelia's original sin. No matter how firmly she rejects the association between feminine beauty and female sexuality, as a young woman, she cannot escape the fate of being "beautified" and thus sexualized. Therefore, " 'beautified' is a vile phrase" (2.2.111-112); it brings "calumnious strokes" to "the charest maid." Perhaps that is what Hamlet means by "be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny" (3.1.137-138).

The experience of seeing *The Mousetrap* further alters Ophelia's understanding of female sexuality and hence her perception of herself. As previously discussed, intended for the queen, the central message of *The Mousetrap* is the idea that women's corrupt sexual appetite is the very cause of men's death. After witnessing the murderous power of female sexuality and realizing that sexuality is embedded in her own beauty, Ophelia is shocked by the death of her father. The extreme distress she experiences causes her to descend into madness. Madness, as a form of primary thinking, shows the same kind of dream-like logic, which causes two independent events to be perceived as somehow causally related to each other. Therefore, as absurd as this idea may sound, Ophelia seems to believe that her sexualized body has led to the death of her father. In Ophelia's version of the tragedy, her beauty attracts the male intruder to her household; this male intruder then murders the male authority of the household. The mad Ophelia mentions in her speech a "false steward, that stole his master's daughter" (4.5.172); perhaps she is referring to Hamlet, who steals the daughter and kills the master of the household.

Moreover, the nature of patriarchal marriage is the transfer of the female body from the possession of the father to the possession of the husband who later becomes the new father figure in the household. The father only has temporary possession of his daughter, as Polonius says, “I have a daughter: have, while she is mine” (2.2.106). When Ophelia gives herself to Hamlet, she therefore metaphorically kills Polonius by undermining his masculine power:

A second time I kill my husband dead
 When second husband kisses me in bed.
 (3.2.190-191)

Her appetite for romance makes her susceptible to the womanly frailty that awakens death.

Ophelia’s fragmented speech and elusive songs provide some insight into her mind:

How should I your truelove know
 From another one?
 By his cockle hat and staff,
 And his sandal shoon.
 (4.5.23-26)

He is dead and gone, lady,
 He is dead and gone;
 At his head a grass-green turf,
 At his heels a stone.
 (4.5.29-32)

The first two lines of the ballad introduce the difficulty of distinguishing “truelove” from “another one.” That is, Ophelia has to make the impossible choice between two men in her life, father and lover, while one has become antagonistic to the other. The man in her song who is “dead and gone” seems to be her father. Yet he oddly wears the “cockle hat” and the “sandal shoon” of a pilgrim. This ballad is in fact derived from “The Walsingham Song⁷” which tells the story of a pilgrim lover who has died in his journey. Therefore, the “he” who is “dead and gone” may refer to her father as well as her lover:

First, her father slain;
 Next, your son gone.
 (4.5.79-80)

In her song, father and lover collapse into one figure, which further obscures the difference between the two “husbands.” Uniting herself with one of them leads to the death of the other.

Either consciously or unconsciously, Ophelia eventually makes her choice which is reflected in her song “Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s Day.”

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s day,
 All in the morning betime,
 And I a maid at your window,
 To be your Valentine.

Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,
 And dupp’d the chamber door,
 Let in the maid, that out a maid
 Never departed more.

(4.5.48-55)

This ballad alludes to the loss of virginity, or more metaphorically, the sexualization of the female body. That is, regardless of whether Ophelia’s relationship with Hamlet is consummated or not, she is no longer her father’s daughter when she becomes Hamlet’s Valentine. Her singing of “Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s Day” after her father’s death suggests that Ophelia perceives a connection between her romantic relationship with Hamlet and the murder of Polonius by Hamlet.

Ophelia considers her beauty the cause of the tragedy that befalls her household. “Divided from herself and her fair judgment” (4.5.85), she identifies with the Queen whose beauty, in a similar way, brings death to Elsinore. In that sense, the Queen “is a thing—of nothing” (4.2.28,30); the “beautified” and hence sexualized Queen signifies the horror of “nothing,” that is, the absolute annihilation caused by female sexuality. In the 1990 film

adaptation of *Hamlet* directed by Franco Zeffirelli⁸, Ophelia runs into the castle in a manic state, asking the insolent question: “Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?” (4.5.21). The anger in her voice seems to suggest that “the beauteous majesty of Denmark” is the cause of her father’s death. Confronted by Ophelia, Gertrude looks frightened as she quickly walks away from her accuser, but is soon caught again by the mad Ophelia.



(Gertrude and Ophelia in Zeffirelli’s 1990 *Hamlet*)

Gertrude’s fear of Ophelia seems out of proportion, since Gertrude herself is not directly responsible for Polonius’s death, yet she feels guilty nonetheless, as she confesses:

To my sick soul (as sin’s true nature is)
 Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss;
 So full of artless jealousy is guilt
 It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

(4.5.17-20)

This sense of guilt may come from the realization that her own sexuality, as a reflection of “sin’s true nature,” has infected her soul with a kind of sickness that spreads misfortune and death to people around her. In the film adaptation, a group of women in “solemn black” (1.2.78) break

out in tears when the mad Ophelia walks past them, as if they all share the same distressing guilt experienced by Gertrude and Ophelia. Women of Elsinore come to the painful realization that their sexuality has become the symbol of sin. Ophelia leaves the castle while saying: “Good night, ladies, good night. Sweet ladies, good night, good night” (4.5.72-73). The strong association between sleep and death in *Hamlet* makes Ophelia’s salutation seem especially ominous. Her salutation once again links femininity to death, although this time, these ladies are associated with the death of not so much the masculine as the feminine. In that sense, Ophelia foretells her own demise.

The mad Ophelia develops an obsession with flowers, which seems to indicate her wish to return to the idea of “the primrose path,” the romanticized vision of female sexuality she previously endorses.

Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself,
She turns to favor and to prettiness.
(4.5.186-187)

Ophelia hopes to redeem the tragedy by turning murderous female sexuality— “hell itself”—into “favor” and “prettiness,” that is, something benevolent and beautiful. The two conflicting views of sexuality compete against each other in her mind. Sadly, the association between female sexuality and death eventually has the upper hand.

I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died.
(4.5.182-184)

Her father’s death completely destroys her positive view of sexuality. Ophelia realizes that the tragedy can never be redressed since her father “never will come again” (4.5.192). Consequently, “the primrose path” that used to signify romance now leads to death. Flowers are no longer called “the infants of the spring” (1.3.39) and have become, instead, “dead men’s fingers”

(4.7.171). They are scattered not on Ophelia's "bride bed" (5.1.247)—as she may have envisioned before—but in her "muddy" (4.7.183) grave.

Ophelia's death by water symbolizes the ritual of purification. The contaminating female sexuality within her is exorcised, just as "the worser part" (3.4.158) of Gertrude's heart is thrown away so that she can "live the purer with the other half" (3.4.159). The drowned Ophelia literally has "no life to breathe" (3.4.199).

And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
 May violets spring!
 (5.1.241-242)

Death restores her purity. Ophelia can only be both "fair" and "unpolluted" when she is dead and thus no longer associated with female sexuality. Lying in her grave, Ophelia rises up to become the "celestial" beauty in Hamlet's imagination. "Beauty" and "honesty" may finally coexist in her dead female body which no longer has the capacity to breed sinners. The violets that have withered previously now spring from her flesh. They symbolize the kind of love unadulterated by sexuality. Her death purifies her, thus making it possible for Hamlet to love her again, as he says: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (5.1.271-273). He jumps into her grave, asking to be "buried quick with her," which indicates his wish for a symbolic marriage—a "union" (5.2.327) that is not contaminated by female sexuality.

Throughout Ophelia's life, her understanding of female sexuality undergoes tremendous changes. At first, she has in her mind an idealized vision of sexuality that is associated with love and romance. This idea of hers originally comes from Hamlet, as Ophelia says: "indeed, my lord, you made me believe so" (3.1.116). When the same Hamlet speaks about the sinful nature of female sexuality and how he hates her for her "wantonness" (3.1.148), Ophelia feels "the more

deceived” (3.1.120). “His songs” (1.3.30) are now changed, “like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh” (3.1.161). As a result, Ophelia tries to dissociate herself from sinful female sexuality and become again “the chariest maid” who thinks “nothing.” Yet Hamlet shows her that even when she thinks nothing, she is still, in some way, an embodiment of female sexuality. Eventually, Ophelia accepts the idea that female sexuality is an intrinsic part of her—it is embedded in her feminine beauty. When her father dies, Ophelia finally falls into the absurd world of tragedy, where everything is centered upon the contaminating female body. Seeing what she sees in both *The Mousetrap* and *Hamlet* makes her believe that her sexuality is indeed the cause of her own father’s death. This belief devours her sanity and leads her to her “muddy death” (4.7.183).

Every step Ophelia has taken is in some way influenced by Hamlet. Her case illustrates the special relationship between the feminine Self and the masculine Self in Shakespearean tragedy. The masculine Self is constantly “discovering itself, judging and shaping itself” (Bamber 8), whereas the feminine Self is being discovered, judged, and shaped by the masculine Self. Throughout the play, the feminine Self cannot choose but to passively react to the changes initiated by the masculine Self. These changes eventually lead to the unfortunate transformation of the tragic heroine. One may as well say that “[Ophelia] is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet” (Lacan 20), not in the sense that Ophelia is merely the object of Hamlet’s desire—as Lacan implies, but in the sense that feminine selfhood in Shakespearean tragedy is tethered forever to masculine selfhood. This relationship is mutual. Shakespeare needs Ophelia to enable Hamlet, too. Her tragic transformation in response to Hamlet’s tragedy gives meaning to *Hamlet*. Lee Edwards⁹ believes that “we can imagine Hamlet’s story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet” (Edwards 36). However, Hamlet’s story would

not be complete without Ophelia's participation—in the same way that an action needs a reaction in order to be considered an action at all.

This chapter begins with the attempt to address the ambiguity surrounding Ophelia. The most ambiguous part of her life is her “muddy death” (4.7.183). In Act 5, two gravediggers discuss Ophelia's death, raising the perhaps unanswerable question: does she drown herself wittingly (5.1.12-13)? As the clown indicates, suicide “argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is to act, to do, to perform” (5.1.11-12). An act thus requires an active sense of agency. However, as the feminine Self in this play, Ophelia is deprived of agency; she is constantly defined and redefined by the masculine Self as the embodiment of female sexuality. Ophelia has lived her entire life under the shadow of Hamlet's actions; the only action she herself is capable of initiating seems to be her own death—if it is a case of suicide indeed. The idea that “she willfully seeks her own salvation” (5.1.2) at least gives Ophelia some sense of agency. Would it be possible for the feminine Self to keep her agency in the world of Shakespearean tragedy? In *Othello*, Desdemona further blurs the boundary between murder and suicide by saying “nobody—I myself” (5.2.123). What causes her to take blame on herself for her tragic death? I will address these questions and continue the discussion of the feminine Self in the next chapter.

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“Nobody—I Myself”: The Self and the Other in *Othello*¹

In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A. C. Bradley² begins his analysis of *Othello* with the question: “Why did [Iago] act as we see him acting in the play?” (Bradley 47). Bradley’s question echoes Othello’s appeal:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?
(5.2.297-298)

Bradley’s reading of the play thus becomes an attempt to address Othello’s unanswered question and, by doing so, alleviate the anxiety of both Othello and Bradley himself, the reader who has empathetically identified with Othello. Like Othello, Bradley is overwhelmed by “the combination of unusual intellect with extreme evil” (Bradley 59) shown in Iago’s character. Samuel Taylor Coleridge³, likewise, finds Iago’s “motiveless malignity” (Coleridge 10) fiendish and frightful. Focusing intensively on Iago’s diabolic nature allows Bradley and Coleridge to imagine Othello as a romantic hero whose tragedy is entirely caused by external evil. Their idea resonates with Othello’s self-justification: “one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme” (5.2.341-342). F. R. Leavis⁴, however, offers a different approach to the play. As implied by the deprecating title of his essay, “Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero: or The Sentimentalist’s Othello,” Leavis criticizes Bradley and Coleridge for idealizing Othello and thus sentimentalizing *Othello*. According to Leavis, the tragedy reveals the flaws in Othello’s own character, which Bradley and Coleridge refuse to acknowledge. Moreover, Leavis argues that Othello’s love for Desdemona is but “a matter of self-centered and self-regarding satisfactions—pride, sensual possessiveness, appetite, love of loving” (Leavis 111).

Feminist critic Carol Thomas Neely⁵ observes that critics of *Othello* have divided into two camps: the “Othello critics,” as represented by Bradley and Coleridge, who view the play

through the noble Moor's eyes and "accept Othello at his own high estimate" (Neely 211), and the "Iago critics," such as Leavis and T. S. Eliot⁶, who adopt Iago's cynical voice and call Othello's character as well as his love for Desdemona into question. The Othello critics and the Iago critics, albeit holding virtually contradictory opinions, base their arguments on the same premise, that is, the central theme of *Othello* is the antithesis between good and evil. They disagree with respect to whether that evil is external or internal. Therefore, much of the attention has been given to the conflict between Othello and Iago, while the female characters in this play have been long neglected, especially Desdemona who ironically is at the center of the conflict. The Othello critics and the Iago critics tend to view Desdemona as an object with "a passivity verging on catatonia" (Neely 212); that is, Desdemona is not so much a person as a piece of dramatic mechanism that has to be sacrificed in order to intensify the conflict between good and evil.

The feminist critics, though disagreeing with the objectification of Desdemona, have not been able to do justice to her, either, in part because Desdemona's character seems so incompatible with the ideology of feminism. At the beginning of the play, Desdemona appears as a confident, articulate young woman who challenges the convention of patriarchal marriage. However, she later declines into a submissive wife who with her dying breath approves her husband's violent behavior by saying: "Nobody—I myself" (5.2.123). In her essay " 'Truly, an obedient lady': Desdemona, Emilia, and the Doctrine of Obedience in *Othello*," Sara Munson Deats⁷ thinks of Desdemona as the victim of patriarchal marriage. She argues that initially, Desdemona endorses a liberated view of marriage that emphasizes mutuality and interdependence, but as a victim of marital violence, she eventually gives in to "the patriarchal ideology of absolute domination and submission" (Deats 247). Neely further indicates that while

patriarchy and men's vanity are the main causes of the tragedy, Desdemona's own "naïveté and docility" (Neely 221) also lead to her demise.

Although feminist critics like Deats and Neely find Desdemona's tragedy lamentable, they do not empathize with Desdemona in the same way the Othello critics empathize with Othello. In fact, feminist critics are far from satisfied with Desdemona as the tragic heroine in *Othello*, to the extent that Neely would rather identify herself with Emilia than with Desdemona:

[Emilia] is dramatically and symbolically the play's fulcrum. It is as an Emilia critic, then, that I should like to approach the play, hoping to perceive it with something like her good-natured objectivity.

(Neely 213)

According to Neely, Emilia, descended from the heroines in Shakespearean comedy, exemplifies the favorable traits of a Shakespearean shrew. She is wise and witty; with a certain kind of emotional clarity, she "combines sharp-tongued honesty with warm affection" (Neely 219).

Therefore, the knowing Emilia is said to be the feminine Self in *Othello*, not the confused Desdemona. Linda Bamber⁸, however, points out that *Othello*, as a Shakespearean tragedy, "is about confusion, not clarity" (Bamber 13). Making the comic heroine represented by Emilia the fulcrum of *Othello* inevitably alters the meaning of the tragedy:

Neely's reading implies that we are to center the play on sanity, on Emilia, on the feminine. If we do, Othello is exasperating, his story tedious, and his death good riddance to bad rubbish.

(Bamber 13)

As a feminist critic herself, Bamber argues that instead of inappropriately centering the tragedy on a female character, feminist criticism should appreciate the idea of the feminine as the Other in Shakespearean tragedy. Not unlike the Othello and Iago critics, Bamber emphasizes that in *Othello*, "the interest is in the ignorant, erring, angry male, not in the knowing, right-feeling woman" (Bamber 13).

In summary, as the heroine in *Othello*, Desdemona has been neglected by male critics while misrepresented by the feminist critics. I find it saddening that there are not many Desdemona critics who empathetically identify with Desdemona and understand the tragedy through her eyes. *Othello* may be a commentary on the conflict between good and evil, light and dark; it may as well be a critique of patriarchal ideology, but I think what lies at the heart of the play is love—to be precise, the redemptive power of love, which is embodied in the very character of Desdemona. Instead of dwelling on Desdemona's passivity as the object or the victim, I hope to call attention to her activity. In this chapter, I will examine *Othello* from the perspective of a Desdemona critic, that is, reading Desdemona as another representation of the feminine Self in Shakespearean tragedy, and analyzing her character in relation to Othello, the masculine Self in this play. One challenge may be that in *Othello*, Othello and Desdemona are simultaneously both the Self and the Other, which adds another layer of complexity to the dynamic dialogue between the feminine and the masculine in the play, that is, the dialogue happens both between and within the characters of Othello and Desdemona.

The central conflict in *Othello* arises from Othello's blackness—his status as the racial Other. The contrast between black and white, closely associated with the opposition between the Other and the Self, is established at the very beginning of the play with the line: “an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe” (1.1.85-86). As the line suggests, Othello as the Other suffers constant dehumanization. Deprived of his name, he is often referred to as “the Moor.” Moreover, Iago's metaphor focuses particularly on the monstrous sexuality of the Other; Othello's relationship with Desdemona is reduced to the coupling between two animals. Later on, this impression of Othello is reinforced by Roderigo who calls him “a lascivious Moor” (1.1.123). It seems that Othello's otherness reflects not simply his blackness, but the connotations of his

blackness. In her essay “ ‘And Wash the Ethiop White’: Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*,” Karen Newman⁹ calls attention to the imagined link between blackness and monstrous sexuality in Western culture, which is embedded in a Renaissance reading of the story in Genesis of Noah and his three sons.

The wicked Spirite...finding at this flood none but a father and three sonnes living...caused one of them to transgresse and disobey his father’s commaundement, that after him all his posterities shoulde bee accursed... Noe straitely commaunded his sonnes and their wives, that they...should use continencie and abstaine from carnall copulation with their wives... His wicked sonne Cham disobeyed...used company with his wife... For the which wicked and detestable fact, as an example for contempt of Almightye God, and disobedience of parents, God would a sonne should bee borne whose name was Chus, who not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and loathsome...And of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa.

(Newman 79)

The story of a second fall associates blackness with unrestrained sexuality which threatens the order of society. This blackness, like a hereditary disease, is passed on from one generation to another through wanton behavior. In *Othello*, Iago expresses the same sentiment in order to provoke fear in Brabantio:

...you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans.

(1.1.108-111)

Therefore, *Othello* is perceived as not only the racial Other, but also the sexual Other whose contaminating sexuality blackens everything that is white and pure. In *Othello*, black sexuality further becomes associated with black magic. Brabantio calls *Othello* “a practicer / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant” (1.2.77-78). Peculiar as it may sound, Brabantio virtually accuses *Othello* of being a witch who enchants his daughter with “foul charms” (1.2.72). *Othello* himself, adopting his accuser’s language, also uses the word “witchcraft” (1.2.168)—though ironically—

to describe his wooing of Desdemona. These frequent allusions to witchcraft introduce elements of the Feminine, drawing a parallel between Othello's sexualized black body and the uncanny female body, which adds yet another layer of otherness to Othello's identity.

Othello's blackness thus signifies a monstrous sexual appetite that is gendered feminine, an idea I will develop further later. The fear of being dehumanized and emasculated urges Othello to build himself another identity so as to escape his identity as the Other. He first takes on the identity of a European traveler:

Wherein of anters vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heave,
.....
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Grew beneath their shoulders.

(1.3.139-144)

Othello mystifies his own past with stories of barbaric landscapes and primitive cultures. Yet by intentionally exoticizing his origin, Othello distances himself from the foreign land from whence he comes, while taking on the detached perspective of a traveler who returns home to tell the tales to his own people. He thus becomes "an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (1.1.133-134). As the wandering traveler who walks along the border between the Self and the Other, Othello enjoys his "unhousèd free condition" (1.2.25). However, he also longs to be domesticated, that is, to be recognized as the Self. Therefore, Othello also presents himself as the Venetian warrior who defends Cyprus against the dark skinned Turks.

Our wars are done; the Turks are drowned.
(2.1.200)

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?
(2.3.169-170)

In his language, Othello sets up the contrast between “we” and the “Turks.” By labeling the Turks as the racial Other, he integrates himself into the Venetian “we.”

Furthermore, Othello associates his identity as the warrior with an almost ascetic manner of life. He celebrates his masculine self-control by abstaining from pleasure, comfort, and anything that is even remotely related to the indulgence of sexual appetite which may be considered feminine.

The tyrant Custom, most grave senators,
Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war
My thrice-driven bed of down.

(1.3.226-228)

Here Othello replaces the “thrice-driven bed of down” with the “flinty and steel couch of war,” rejecting that which is soft and feminine, while embracing the “hardness” (1.3.230) in which his masculinity thrives. He constantly acknowledges his lack of interest in “soft phrases” (1.3.82) and “soft parts” (3.3.263), perhaps as an attempt to distance himself from the stereotypes of the racial and sexual Other who, like Cham and Eve, eventually succumbs to the devil’s temptation. One line in the play best characterizes Othello’s identity as the warrior:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.

(1.2.58)

Othello enters the scene in all his military glory; the line reveals his composure and confidence as a warrior who has accustomed himself to “the flinty and steel couch of war.” Moreover, the bright sword, symbolizing the male genitalia, should be kept away from the dew—the moist feminine presence that insidiously erodes masculinity. In that sense, the line also resonates with Othello’s ascetic tendencies.

Othello's character is built upon the dichotomy between the Self and the Other. On the one hand, he is the glorious Venetian warrior whose masculinity is complemented by flawless self-control. On the other hand, he is perceived as the "lascivious Moor" with a contaminating sexuality that is often associated with the Feminine. While anxiously rejecting his identity as the Other, Othello takes great pride in his masculine selfhood:

My parts, my title, and my perfect soul
Shall manifest me rightly.

(1.2.30-31)

Meanwhile, the split between the Self and the Other is also seen in Desdemona's character; the play places her at the center of the Madonna-Whore dichotomy, the idea that under the male gaze, the woman is either a virgin whose purity is associated with the divine, or a promiscuous seductress whose sexuality corrupts the honor of men.

Desdemona is first mentioned in the play as the Venetian daughter, a treasure that has been stolen from Venice by the Moor. Representing the feminine selfhood of "our nation"

(1.3.69), Desdemona is described as:

A maid so tender, fair, and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation

(1.3.65-68)

a maiden never bold,
of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
blushed at herself

(1.3.94-96)

The young Desdemona exemplifies modesty and chastity. Her mind must be simple, since she seems to be always "happy." Incapable of complicated thoughts, she would blush before she could even think of anything transgressive. Furthermore, the thought of marriage has never

entered her mind and never will, as though her youth and beauty would somehow be preserved along with her purity. In that sense, she is truly “the divine Desdemona” (2.1.73).

Yet shockingly, the obedient daughter turns out to be the mistress of the lascivious Moor. She thus falls from heaven to “the sooty bosom” (1.2.69) of the dark skinned devil. Desdemona becomes in her father’s eyes a duplicitous stranger whose manners are unfamiliar and whose thoughts unfathomable. The bond between the father and the daughter is permanently broken, as Brabantio laments:

Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds
By what you see them act.

(1.1.167-168)

Brabantio further claims that he “had rather to adopt a child than get it” (1.3.189). When he publically disowns his daughter, she is therefore also disowned by Venice. The Venetians think of Desdemona as the delicate creature who has sold herself to the Moor; she is thus infected with the same kind of otherness that characterizes Othello. As briefly hinted at before, the signifiers of otherness—sexuality, blackness, and femininity—are all entangled in *Othello*. In the play, Iago explicitly draws a parallel between black sexuality and female sexuality:

These Moors are changeable in their wills—fill thy purse with money. The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida. She must change for youth. When she is sated with his body she will find the errors of her choice.

(1.3.342-348)

Iago’s language is filled with metaphors of eating, which reduces the love between Othello and Desdemona to an appetite for each other’s body. Once their physical desires are “sated,” the attraction that holds them together will soon dissipate. Iago further debases their marriage by calling it “a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and supersubtle Venetian” (1.3.351-352). Here, both Othello and Desdemona are dehumanized and bereaved of their names. Iago’s language

suggests that the Moors and the “whores” are representations of the Other that embodies sexual corruption.

Both Othello and Desdemona are victims of the dichotomy between the Self and the Other; their identities are polarized by the false binary imposed upon them. However, they approach the dichotomy rather differently. Othello internalizes the dichotomy, splitting his identity into Othello the Warrior and Othello the Moor, idealizing the former while dismissing the latter. Therefore, Othello’s character is so divided that his selfhood becomes fragmented, which makes him extremely vulnerable to the attacks on his identity. When his masculinity is threatened by female sexuality, his identity as the self-assured warrior comes crashing down as he laments: “Othello’s occupation’s gone!” (3.3.354). Moreover, Othello’s character lacks congruence; he is constantly torn between conflicting thoughts, while his emotion oscillates between love and hate. Eventually, his world is engulfed by chaos:

Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that th’ affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.

(5.2.98-100)

As the sun and the moon collapse into each other, the distinction between light and dark, the Self and the Other, the masculine and the feminine, becomes ambiguous. The image of an earthquake further indicates the unbridgeable abyss within Othello’s fragmented selfhood.

Desdemona, by contrast, tries to close the gap between the Self and the Other. Being more realistic and less idealistic than Othello, she does not engage herself in the fruitless pursuit of a “perfect soul” (1.2.30). Instead, she rejects the false binary imposed upon herself, while offering the possibility of integrating the otherness into her selfhood, and hence achieving a sense of wholeness as the feminine Self that exists outside of the Madonna-Whore dichotomy. In

her speech, Desdemona articulates the unbreakable connection between sacred love and physical devotion, and by doing so, invalidates the dichotomy between Madonna and Whore.

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
 And to his honors and his valiant parts
 Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
 So that, dear lords, if I be left behind
 A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
 The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
 And I a heavy interim shall support
 By his dear absence. Let me go with him.
 (1.3.247-254)

Desdemona first elevates her romantic relationship with Othello to a spiritual partnership by drawing an intimate connection between “his mind” and “my soul.” Yet meanwhile, she openly expresses her desire for consummation which is linked not to corrupt sexuality, but to romantic love which has been consecrated by marriage. Here Desdemona offers a new perspective on human sexuality, which directly challenges Iago's cynical view.

Desdemona's attitude towards sexuality, however, induces great anxiety in Othello. He fears sexuality for the otherness it signifies, which reminds him of his blackness and all its negative connotations. Therefore, Othello has developed a strong aversion towards physical desires. In his response to Desdemona's speech, he once again asserts his ascetic tendencies:

I therefore beg it not
 To please the palate of my appetite,
 Nor to comply with heat—the young affects
 In me defunct—and proper satisfaction;
 But to be free and bounteous of her mind;
 (1.3.256-260)

Moreover, unlike Desdemona who is able to view sexuality differently, Othello perpetually associates sexuality with not only lust and depravity but also a lack of self-discipline which he considers effeminate.

No, when light-winged toys
 Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness
 My speculative and officed instrument,
 That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
 Let housewives make a skillet of my helm...
 (1.3.263-267)

Othello degrades what Desdemona considers sacred. To him, sexuality has nothing to do with the spiritual. The “light-winged toys / Of feathered Cupid” echoes the “thrice-driven bed of down” (1.3.228); both signify pleasure, comfort and the indulgence of frivolous desires, which Othello firmly rejects. Furthermore, Othello worries that this softness would breed “wanton dullness” that might “corrupt and taint” his “business.” The word “dullness” subtly captures his fear of “the dew” that may rust “the bright swords.” In other words, Othello perceives female sexuality as a threat to his masculinity on which he builds the entirety of his military glory. Sexuality thus directly jeopardizes his identity as the warrior, which also explains the curious picture he paints: “Let housewives make a skillet of my helm.” Othello associates sexuality with the feminine and holds on to the belief that female sexuality may metaphorically castrate a military man like himself, as he later says: “I’ll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again” (1.4.206-208).

Therefore, the conflict in Othello and Desdemona’s relationship emerges very early on. Desdemona hopes to “consecrate” her love for Othello through physical devotion, whereas Othello wishes for “a perpetually unconsummated courtship” (Neely 217). When it comes to sexuality, Desdemona actively expresses her desires; Othello, however, takes great pains to repress his sexuality—to the extent of saying “the young affects / In me defunct.”

Sensing the potentially unresolvable conflict, Othello grows increasingly anxious. His apocalyptic language betrays his anxiety:

If it were now to die,
 'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
 My soul hath her content so absolute
 That not another comfort like to this
 Succeeds in unknown fate.

(2.1.187-191)

The word “unknown” is especially interesting in that it indicates the unfamiliar, the uncanny, and ultimately, the Other. Othello considers female sexuality an unknown battlefield where his masculine confidence fails him. To venture into the realm of sexuality is to face death directly. At the happiest moment of his life, Othello is preoccupied with thoughts of death. His apocalyptic thinking not only reflects his fear of the potential influence consummation may have on his masculine identity, but also reveals his primary defense mechanism; that is, when attacked by anxiety, Othello feels the instant need to destroy the source of that anxiety. His status as the Other agitates him, he therefore rejects his blackness by covering it with his new identity as the Venetian warrior. In this scene, Othello evokes the image of annihilation, which suggests that his anxiety towards sexuality has overwhelmed him:

...May the winds blow till they have wakened death,
 And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas
 Olympus-high, and duck again as low
 As hell's from heaven!

(2.1.184-187)

Desdemona, by contrast, takes on a more hopeful perspective:

The heavens forbid
 But that our loves and comforts should increase,
 Even as our days do grow.

(2.1.191-193)

She seems to believe that physical intimacy will strengthen the emotional connection between them. While Othello is preoccupied with death and its power to reduce everything to ashes,

Desdemona envisions a future where their love grows stronger everyday. Her optimism, however, further intensifies the conflict between them. Going towards opposite directions, Othello and Desdemona move further apart from each other.

In *Othello*, the concept of sexuality is entangled with the idea of otherness—particularly the otherness within oneself, since everyone is subject to physical corruption. The Moors and the “whores,” perceived as the strangers in Venice, thus become the embodiment of this unsettling otherness. By debasing the racial Other and the sexual Other, one feels as if one has somehow surmounted one’s own instinctual desires, even though these desires are by definition insurmountable, which is why one needs to externalize them—projecting them onto an entity that is drastically different from oneself, such as a black man, or a woman. In that sense, Othello’s fear of sexuality is understandable; he has reasons to fear because when his body is already sexualized, anything he does may be interpreted as an expression of his monstrous sexuality. Desdemona who is in the same situation best articulates this dilemma:

I cannot say “whore.”
It does abhor me now I speak the word;
(4.2.160-161)

The word “whore” causes Desdemona great distress and fear; she seems to suggest that when her body is already sexualized, the very act of “saying ‘whore’” might be perceived as enough proof of her lechery.

As the victim of otherization, Othello, however, also participates in the victimization of Desdemona. Agitated by her eager embrace of sexuality, he starts to perceive Desdemona as the embodiment of sexuality, the externalization of his own otherness. His love for her is thus mingled with layers of projection. When he loves her, she is the “fair warrior” (2.1.179); when his love for her dissipates, she becomes in his eyes the sexualized body which he seeks to

destroy. Yet his love for Desdemona—though passionate—is extremely fragile. He brings his own confusion about the Self and the Other into their relationship. Even as Othello recalls his wooing of Desdemona, his language betrays his looming anxiety towards her sexuality. When describing Desdemona’s great interest in his story, he says:

She’d come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse...

My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of kisses.
She swore in faith ’twas strange, ’twas passing strange,
’Twas pitiful, ’twas wondrous pitiful.

(1.3.147-160)

This scene gives the reader a glance of Desdemona and Othello’s love story before the tragedy begins. Othello recalls a rose-colored memory he has of Desdemona; the memory itself is perhaps softened by time and fused with fantasy. Yet even this tender moment is tinted with anxiety. Othello is clearly overwhelmed by the activity Desdemona shows; he describes her as “half the wooer” (1.3.174). His language portrays a woman with a greedy appetite, who hungrily devours the man as she drowns him in “a world of kisses.” Moreover, she shows an appetite especially for things that are considered “strange.” Iago later describes Desdemona’s attraction to Othello as reflecting something “unnatural” within herself:

One may smell in such a will most rank,
Four disproportions, thoughts unnatural.
(3.3.232-233)

Iago’s vile accusation, however, is but a reflection of Othello’s own suspicion, as he speaks of “how nature erring from itself” (3.3.227).

As this suspicion within himself grows like a tumor, Othello begins to interpret all of Desdemona's behaviors differently; he seems to admire her social graces, but at the same time, he also perceives them as signs of her monstrous sexual appetite:

...my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances.
(3.3.184-185)

Othello acknowledges all of these social graces as her virtues. Yet at the same time he also seems to be fixated on her appetite, as he keeps coming back to the image of eating. By mentioning specifically that she "feeds well," he brings back the uncanny image of a greedy mouth that devours everything. Furthermore, Othello calls Desdemona "an admirable musician" and believes that "she will sing the savageness out of a bear" (4.1.190-191). Later in the play, Desdemona does sing the Willow Song and thus proves her musical talent. However, in Renaissance England, music is closely associated with the duality of spirituality and sensuality. In her essay "'Sing Againe Syren': The Female Musician and Sexual Enchantment in Elizabethan Life and Literature," Linda Phyllis Austern¹⁰ writes:

Women, who possessed the natures of both Mary and Eve, were regarded as agents alternately of salvation and destruction even as music was perceived as an inspiration to both heavenly rapture and carnal lust.

(Austern 420)

In that sense, female musicians in Renaissance England were especially subject to the Madonna-Whore dichotomy. Therefore, although Desdemona's musical talent makes her "more virtuous" (3.3.186), it simultaneously serves as "the ocular proof" (3.3.357) of her excessive sexuality.

Desdemona thus becomes in Othello's eyes the embodiment of monstrous female sexuality. Once he has written "whore" upon her, even her moist hand may seem to him the very indication of her lustful nature:

This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart.
 Hot, hot, and moist. This hand of yours requires
 A sequester from liberty; fasting, and prayer;
 Much castigation; exercise devout;
 For here's a young and sweating devil here
 That commonly rebels.

(3.4.38-43)

Othello makes an assumption about her heart based on her hand; in his imagination, he compares her hot and moist hand to “a young and sweating devil.” Later, he does refer to Desdemona as “Desdemon” (4.2.40) and calls her a “devil” (4.1.240) as he brutally strikes her. He sees her as a devil who—with her raging sexuality— “rebels” against the patriarchal order and hence threatens his own masculinity. Indeed, Othello worries that his masculine identity may dissolve in that insidious female moisture, just as the bright swords are rusted from the dew. Therefore, he urges Desdemona to practice sexual continence, perhaps as an attempt to save his purely masculine selfhood from the contamination of female sexuality.

In that sense, Othello is in agreement with Hamlet; Othello is essentially saying to Desdemona: “get thee to a nunnery” (*Hamlet* 3.1.121). Hamlet, nevertheless, is able to declare with ease that “I loved you not” (*Hamlet* 3.1.119) and so “we will have no moe marriage” (*Hamlet* 3.1.149-150). Othello, by contrast, finds himself in a much bleaker situation; that is, he is as though under a love spell—subdued “entirely to her love” (3.4.60). “Eaten up with passion” (3.3.388), Othello is torn between love and hate, while his perception of Desdemona splits into two incompatible halves: a gentle woman and a cunning whore. Even when Othello says “I will chop her into messes” (4.1.202), he is, at the same time, also thinking about “the pity of it” (4.1.198) and the tremendous pain he will suffer as a result of losing her.

In absolute despair, Othello comes to the realization that his love for Desdemona has merged his soul with hers; she is the central part of his selfhood; she is

The fountain from the which my current runs
 Or else dries up—to be discarded thence,
 Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
 To knot and gender in...

(4.2. 58-61)

Othello thinks of Desdemona as the spring of his life. Water cannot be separated from its source; in that sense, they have fully become one. Therefore, when Desdemona's body is contaminated by sexuality, Othello's soul also becomes subject to corruption. These elements of imperfection destroy his "perfect soul." As a result, Othello experiences a figurative death, which is one of the most poignant moments in the play:

O now, forever
 Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
 Farewell the plumèd troops, and the big wars
 That makes ambition virtue! Oh, farewell!
 Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
 The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
 The royal banner, and all quality,
 Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
 And O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
 The immortal Jove's dead clamors counterfeit,
 Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!

(3.3.344-354)

His speech echoes the apocalyptic vision he has before: now the winds have indeed wakened death. Othello mourns the death of his military identity. Instead of saying "my occupation's gone," he adopts a detached third-person point of view, which suggests that Othello has dissociated himself from his military glory. From this moment on, he is no longer the Venetian warrior with a "tranquil mind." Othello's masculine selfhood collapses as female sexuality enters his life and thrusts him back into the shadowy region of otherness. As mentioned before, Othello constructs his identity based on the dichotomy between the Self and the Other. Moreover, he tends to think in terms of extreme oppositions. In his imagination, he lets "the laboring bark

climb hills of seas / Olympus-high, and duck again as low / As hell's from heaven," which is a vision filled with images of extremes. Othello views the world through the lens of these binary oppositions. Therefore, he celebrates his identity as the warrior by emphasizing his parts, his title, and his perfect soul. Now that he has lost his Venetian selfhood, he thus turns to its opposite—the identity as the racial Other, which he has learned to condemn. Othello starts to reflect upon his blackness, yet sadly, having internalized the racist dichotomy, he, too, associates blackness with corruption and damnation:

My name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.

(3.3.383-385)

His black-and-white thinking allows absolutely no grey areas. Othello thus falls from heaven to hell; his blackness further strengthens his connection with hell:

All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.
'Tis gone.
Arise black vengeance, from the hollow hell!

(3.3.442-444)

When Othello takes on the identity of the dark-skinned Other, he therefore truly becomes the monster Venice imagines him to be. Completely losing control over himself, Othello, like Noah's son Cham, eventually succumbs to the devil's temptation. The temptation scene ends with Iago saying, "I am your own forever" (3.3.476). This chilling line suggests that the devil has entered Othello's mind and turned him into the monstrous Other. This monstrosity manifests itself in the form of violence. His "bloody thoughts, with violent pace" (3.3.454) strip him of his humanity. Othello is changed into a beast that becomes aroused at the sight of blood, as he cries out: "O, blood, blood, blood!" (3.3.448).

However, Othello seems to have changed his mind when he decides to not “shed her blood” (5.2.3), which indicates that his cravings for violence are not simply instinctual desires for aggression. Furthermore, he describes his violent act as “a sacrifice” (5.2.65) he has to make. The word “sacrifice” is peculiar—it comes out of nowhere. Earlier in the play, Othello thinks of the crime he is about to commit as well-justified revenge. In other words, by murdering his sexually corrupt wife, he is able to avenge the death of his masculine identity. Yet the idea of “sacrifice” suggests an alternative reading; that is, at a subconscious level, Othello is aware of Desdemona’s innocence; the murder therefore is just a means to an end. What Othello seeks to destroy is not Desdemona herself but the monstrous sexuality he projects onto her, which is closely associated with his own otherness. Just as Othello washes off his blackness with the blood of the Turks, he now turns to Desdemona who he considers a sexual Other. By extinguishing that “Promethean heat” (5.2.12) within Desdemona and turning her into a “monumental alabaster” (5.2.5), he thus eliminates the source of sexual contamination. To purify Desdemona’s soul, he has to first execute her sexualized body; only when the spring of his life is thoroughly cleaned, can he restore his “former light” (5.2.9): his glorious identity as the warrior. However, Othello’s attempt is clearly doomed to failure; he cannot possibly exorcise the otherness within himself by destroying an external representation of that otherness—shattering a mirror will not change his own complexion. The unnatural act of murder only amplifies his otherness, further alienating him from nature as well as the rest of humankind. Therefore, this sacrifice not only fails to bring back order, but also causes cosmic chaos. In his mind, Othello sees “a huge eclipse” (5.2.98) during which daylight gives way to total darkness—the entire universe becomes a grim reflection of his own blackness.

In order to redeem his masculine selfhood, Othello sacrifices his love, and yet his violent act only makes him “the blacker devil” (5.2.130). As the victim of the Self-Other dichotomy, Othello has developed a fragmented sense of self. Although he presents himself as the valiant warrior, his identity, lacking coherence inside, is extremely fragile; when it collapses, the otherness within him resurfaces, overwhelming him with anguish and horror. By contrast, Desdemona who is also subject to this false dichotomy chooses to integrate the Self and the Other. She loves Othello as both the Warrior and the Moor. When asked whether Othello is easily jealous, Desdemona answers:

I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humors from him.
(3.4.30-31)

Interestingly, Desdemona does not draw this conclusion based on Othello’s identity as a military man whose flawless self-control allows no room for jealousy—which is the impression Othello intends to give. Instead, she alludes to his origin; by doing so, Desdemona breaks the association between blackness and monstrosity—for jealousy is described as “the green-eyed monster” (3.3.166)—while strengthening the connection between Othello’s masculine identity and his foreign origin. Desdemona’s integrative approach facilitates personal growth; perhaps, with her help, Othello would have achieved a sense of unity—if only he allowed their loves and comforts to increase and their days to grow.

As discussed before, Desdemona also combines physical devotion with emotional devotion; by sublimating secular love into sacred love, she challenges the false binary between Madonna and Whore. In the scene where Emilia helps Desdemona to undress, the two women are engaged in an intimate conversation; the theme of their conversation is, not surprisingly, love. It begins with a seemingly irrelevant reference to Lodovico, a nobleman in Venice.

Des. No, unpin me here.

This Lodovico is a proper man.

Emi. A very handsome man.

Des. He speaks well.

Emi. I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.

(4.3.35-40)

Emilia alludes to a woman who is willing to walk barefoot all the way from Venice to the Holy Land to worship the man she loves. This woman's piety further draws a parallel between human love and religious devotion. Like Desdemona, she also embraces the sensual element of her love, seeing sensuality as essentially compatible with spirituality. Sharing the same values as this Venetian lady, Desdemona asks to be shrouded in her wedding sheets in the hope of consecrating her love through her own death.

Unkindness may do much,
And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love.

(4.2.158-160)

Desdemona's language suggests that love transcends life and death. By surrendering her life, she thus frees her love from her mortal frame, elevating it to the altitude of the divine. In that sense, she perhaps also thinks of her death as a "sacrifice." Desdemona dies for a cause—which is different from Othello's "cause" (5.2.1)—love is her cause.

If Desdemona simply considers love her religion and single-mindedly devotes herself to this cause, then her cause *per se* might not necessarily be superior to Othello's cause. In that case, one may even say that both Othello and Desdemona live in their own fantasies; Othello is beguiled by illusions of a glorious masculine identity, whereas Desdemona deceives herself into believing in an idealistic vision of human love. However, Desdemona enters the play as an articulate young woman who exemplifies a kind of emotional clarity; her speech on the "divided

duty” (1.3.179) of a married woman suggests that she may be anyone but a foolishly idealistic girl. Unlike Othello whose actions are mostly driven by fantasy, Desdemona is well grounded in reality. Therefore, I think, her devotion to her love is based on an empathetic understanding of Othello as a human being with both merits and flaws, as she wisely says: “we must think men are not gods” (3.4.148). Desdemona realizes that most people are neither as good as gods nor as evil as devils; humanity is represented by the ambiguous shade of grey that exists in-between black and white. Othello, by contrast, has no tolerance for ambiguity and hence allows absolutely no marks of imperfection to taint his “perfect soul.” In that sense, Desdemona’s perception of Othello is more realistic than his portrayal of himself.

Desdemona never idealizes Othello in the way that Othello idealizes himself. Therefore, Desdemona’s love is not affected by idealization, and precisely for that reason, her love is also not vulnerable to devaluation. When Desdemona expresses her love for Othello in front of the senators, she quite tellingly says:

That I love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world.
(1.3.243-245).

The fact that she refers to Othello as the Moor indicates that she sees the otherness within Othello as essentially part of his selfhood. Her love for Othello thus allows her to embrace his otherness. In other words, Desdemona loves not only “his honors and his valiant parts” which constitute his identity as the handsome Venetian warrior, but also his otherness which has made him unlovable. In her book *Suffocating Mothers*, Janet Adelman¹¹ offers a fascinating interpretation of Othello’s psychology:

[Othello wins Desdemona by describing] not his heroic exploits among men but his sufferings in the strange and desolate landscape of maternal deprivation, its vast and

empty caves and rocks peopled by strangers and cannibals. Thus re-understood, abandonment becomes the burden of his tale and helps to explain both his terrible hunger for Desdemona and the terrible speed with which he believes that she, too, has abandoned him.

(Adelman 66)

I find Adelman's argument especially compelling and would only like to add that "the strange and desolate landscape of maternal deprivation" also reflects Othello's state of being unloved; as Brabantio points out, it is absolutely impossible for a Venetian lady "to fall in love with what she feared to look on!" (1.3.98). Yet Desdemona surprises everyone. She nourishes his soul with love and compassion:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
(1.3.166-167)

Desdemona's love for Othello becomes a transformative experience especially for him in that he experiences genuine love and compassion perhaps for the first time, since in his life, he has been accustomed to "distressful strokes" (1.3.156). From Othello's perspective, Desdemona is indeed "the fountain from the which my current runs." She is the life-giving spring that runs through the "vast and empty caves and rocks." She is the water T. S. Eliot longs for in *The Waste Land*¹²:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock.
(*The Waste Land* 331-338)

Yet sadly, she is also perceived as the water that rusts the bright swords and erodes masculinity. Her life-giving power therefore also breeds corruption; she becomes in his eyes "a cistern for

foul toads / To knot and gender in.” Overwhelmed by the duality and complexity of femininity, Othello thus accuses Desdemona of being “false as water” (5.2.133).

Desdemona accepts his unjust accusation nonetheless, but continues to love him. She is able to forgive him precisely because she understands that the man she loves is not perfect and her capacity for compassion allows her to love his imperfections, too. In her Willow Song, Desdemona sings: “Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve” (4.3.53). Her “approval” is based on her empathetic understanding of him. The word “nobody” appears again in her last line:

Nobody—I myself. Farewell.
Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!
(5.2.123-124)

At the last moment of her life, Desdemona decides to forgive her murderer by thinking of her murder as a sacrifice she chooses to make for the love she bears to him. Therefore, she considers herself in some way responsible for her own death. Furthermore, this inhuman crime Othello commits may be viewed as a demonstration of his monstrous otherness; murderous aggression—the monstrosity within the unconscious of every human being—defeats Desdemona’s life. However, by saying “I myself,” Desdemona once again transforms the Other into a part of the Self; she forgives the monstrous and embraces the otherness within human nature. In that sense, Desdemona is closer to God than any other characters in *Othello*; her human compassion mirrors the grace of God.

Desdemona’s generosity becomes the source of redemption for Othello. The murderer who has been forgiven by his victim sees the possibility of redeeming himself:

Soft you, a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know’t.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well.
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their med'cinable gum

(5.2.334-347)

In his last speech, Othello reflects upon his life journey, trying to form a coherent narrative of himself, which in itself is a laudable attempt to reconcile with his otherness by integrating the Self and the Other. Othello asks his audience to “speak of me as I am,” which nevertheless is an almost impossible task; his description of himself, full of conflicting images, reveals the difficulty of finding unity in Othello’s identity. He begins with an allusion to his Venetian selfhood which is embedded in the service he has done for the state. Then, very reluctantly, he acknowledges his excessive passion as a manifestation of his otherness. By admitting that he “loved not wisely, but too well,” Othello confronts his passionate temperament which has long been repressed. However, this genuine confession is soon followed by the inexplicable claim that he is “not easily jealous.” F. R. Leavis, in particular, finds this line infuriating; he believes that Othello’s depiction of himself as being not susceptible to jealousy simply betrays his “lack of self-knowledge” (Leavis 112). I agree with Leavis that, blinded by his self-idealizing tendencies, Othello has very limited insight into his identity as the Other, yet I would argue that the idea of being “not easily jealous” does fit Othello’s identity as the warrior with a perfect soul. Similarly, the mention of his “subdued eyes... unused to the melting mood” also resonates with the image of an ascetic man who exemplifies superior self-control. Therefore, to completely dismiss his description of himself here is to be unfair to Othello, since his identity as the Venetian warrior is

indeed central to his selfhood. The mention of “tears” really shows Othello’s transformation. In Shakespearean tragedy, emotion is often associated with the excess of femininity and consequently the lack of masculinity. Hamlet’s mourning is described as “unmanly grief” (*Hamlet* 1.2.94). Moreover, Lear even gives a feminine form to his sorrow: “O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element’s below” (*King Lear*¹³ 2.4.55-57). Therefore, when Othello allows his tears to drop, he finally accepts femininity and abandons the illusion of a purely masculine identity.

His last few lines, however, bring back the potentially unresolvable conflict between the Self and the Other.

Set you down this.
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th’ throat the circumcisèd dog,
 And smote him—thus.

[He stabs himself.]
 (5.2.347-352)

The Venetian and the Turk are, again, portrayed as antithetical to each other. By calling the Turk a “circumcisèd dog,” Othello emasculates and dehumanizes the racial Other, while identifying himself as the Venetian warrior who saves the life of a fellow Venetian by killing their mutual enemy. However, Othello completes the story with the action of stabbing himself; by doing so, he thus takes on the role of the racial Other. His action blurs the boundary between the Self and the Other; that is, he is simultaneously the Venetian and the Turk, even though the two identities are so incompatible—especially in the scenario he describes. Therefore, although the play ends with a hint of redemption, Othello’s transformation remains mostly incomplete—he never fully integrates his otherness into his selfhood. In the end, Othello chooses to “die upon a kiss”

(5.2.355), which perhaps symbolizes a delayed consummation, but it is a consummation without Desdemona's active participation, since she has already become a cold statue made of "monumental alabaster." *The Winter's Tale*, however, suggests an alternative ending of this tragedy, which I will discuss in detail in the following chapter.

At the beginning of this chapter, I identify myself as a Desdemona critic. Therefore, I would like to end the chapter with a discussion of what it means to be a Desdemona critic. A Desdemona critic seeks to understand both Othello and *Othello* from Desdemona's compassionate perspective; that is, she genuinely empathizes with others, instead of cynically criticizing them. While reading the plays, one may feel a strong urge to criticize those characters who are morally problematic. However, perhaps it is important to realize that empathizing with a morally flawed character does not make oneself morally compromised. On the contrary, the tolerance of ambiguity and the capacity for compassion—qualities so beautifully displayed by Desdemona—are much needed today.

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“Great Creating Nature”: The Idea of Female Generativity in *The Winter’s Tale*¹

Time. I, that please some, try all, both joy and terror
 Of good and bad, that makes and unfolds error,
 Now take upon me, in the name of Time,
 To use my wings. Impute it not a crime
 To me or my swift passage, that I slide
 O’er sixteen years and leave the growth untried
 Of that wide gap, since it is in my power
 To o’erthrow law and in one self-born hour
 To plant and o’erwhelm custom.

(4.1.1-9)

In *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare gives Time a voice, allowing Time to address the “gentle spectators” (4.1.20) directly. Time in this play represents the father creator, that is, the dramatist himself, who, like a divine presence, oversees everything, and meanwhile, possesses the infinite power “to o’erthrow law” and “to plant and o’erwhelm custom,” since he creates the law and the custom in his own plays. Using Time as a dramatic mechanism, Shakespeare thus “makes and unfolds error,” turning terror into joy, and tragedy into romance.

This transition from tragedy to romance in *The Winter’s Tale* also signals the seasonal change from winter to spring, as Time transports the play from an imperial court to a pastoral landscape. Fascinated by this transition, literary critics seek to interpret its significance from different angles. In her essay “Return of the Sacred Virgin: Memory, Loss, and Restoration in Shakespeare’s Later Plays,” Susan Dunn-Hensley² calls attention to the historical context in which *The Winter’s Tale* was written. Reading the play as a commentary on the iconoclasm of the English Reformation, Dunn-Hensley argues that the resurrection of Hermione at the end of the play signifies the return of the Virgin Mary who brings back national and domestic order. Hermione is said to be the sacred mother who embodies fertility, whose healing power restores life to the land that has suffered the destructive influences of Reformation iconoclasm. Dunn-

Hensley writes: “The first part [of the play] evokes winter, pain, and death, while the second bursts forth as a celebration of spring, joy, and fertility” (Dunn-Hensley 192). This magical transition is made possible by the return of the Virgin Mary.

Expanding upon the idea of fertility, feminist critics tend to read *The Winter’s Tale* as a celebration of female generativity. Taking a psychoanalytic approach, Janet Adelman³ considers this play “an astonishing psychic achievement” (Adelman 235). In this play, Shakespeare critically examines the male fear of female sexuality, a recurring theme in Shakespearean tragedy, which overshadows the first half of *The Winter’s Tale*. This sad tale of winter ends with the revelation that “the fear of the maternal body, not that body itself, is what must be cleansed” (Adelman 219). In the second half of the play, Shakespeare redefines the feminine by linking it to the “great creating Nature” (4.4.88), therefore replacing the fear of female sexuality with the admiration for female generativity.

Adelman’s psychoanalytic approach focuses primarily on the rich symbolic meanings of the characters. Indeed, characters in *The Winter’s Tale* are at once symbols and human beings. Hermione, in particular, is often thought of as a symbol of the sacred generativity of the feminine, whereas her individuality as a character has been neglected. In this chapter, I will offer a close reading of the play that complements Adelman’s influential argument by diving into the psychology of individual characters. Specifically, I will focus on Hermione, the feminine Self in this play, and analyze her in relation to her husband Leontes and her daughter Perdita. Before going into detail, I would like to give an overview of my argument. Descended from the characters in Shakespearean tragedy, Leontes and Hermione represent the masculine and the feminine in the tragic paradigm. Leontes shares with Hamlet and Othello a profound sexual disgust, which causes him to change abruptly and irrationally from the idealization to the

degradation of women, as the female body becomes sexualized in his eyes. Hermione suffers the same fate as the tragic heroines: She is perceived as the embodiment of female sexuality and thus the source of corruption; destruction is imposed upon her as a ritual of purification. However, Hermione differs from the other tragic heroines in that she shows great strength and a natural inclination towards reason and realism. Therefore, Hermione is able to confront her tragic fate with subdued control and dispassionate objectivity. Meanwhile, she finds comfort in her close connection with her children, especially her daughter Perdita, who inherits her mother's emotional clarity and rationality. The two heroines in *The Winter's Tale* are thus wise and love well, which is deemed impossible by Cressida, a tragic heroine who believes that "to be wise and love / Exceeds man's might" (*Troilus and Cressida*⁴, 3.2.157-158). Through depicting the love between Perdita and Florizel, Shakespeare rescripts the dialogue between the masculine and the feminine, redresses the terror and error of tragedy, and thus achieves the transition from tragedy to romance. In Shakespearean romance, the feminine is viewed not as the source of sexual contamination, but as the embodiment of "great creating Nature" (4.4.88)—the secular Goddess who possesses the sacred power of creation.

The Winter's Tale begins in a purely masculine world. Polixenes's visit transports himself and his childhood playmate Leontes back to the masculine world unadulterated by female sexuality. In her essay " 'Boy Eternal': Aging, Games, and Masculinity in *The Winter's Tale*," Gina Bloom⁵ emphasizes the close association between boyhood and manhood in early modern English society. She writes: "boys are always-already in the process of becoming men, and men, by implication, are merely grown-up boys" (Bloom 333). Boyhood is the time of life during which a young man develops his masculinity. His masculine power reaches its apex in middle age, which is referred to as "prime manhood" (Bloom 333), and then masculinity

gradually declines as the body continues to age and eventually succumbs to mortality. Moreover, during manhood, female sexuality comes into play, further complicating the aging process, since female sexuality is believed to be the “false waters” (1.2.132) that contaminate masculinity. Yet for the two kings, sexual contact with women is also considered their “more mature dignities and royal necessities” (1.1.26-27); generational reproduction inevitably becomes part of their royal responsibilities. Polixenes and Leontes, therefore, wish to be “boy eternal” (1.2.65), a fantasy that indicates their anxiety towards the dangers of manhood: aging, sexuality, and mortality. By imploring his childhood friend to stay, Leontes expresses his infantile desire to indefinitely postpone the complications of adulthood through extending the pure and simple boyhood he has shared with Polixenes. Echoing Leontes, Polixenes paints a nostalgic picture of their boyhood:

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i' th' sun,
 And bleat the one at th' other: what we changed
 Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
 The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed
 That any did. Had we pursued that life,
 And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared
 With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven
 Boldly, “not guilty”; the imposition cleared
 Hereditary ours.

(1.2.67-75)

The image of the “twinned lambs” suggests the exclusion of otherness which is embedded in the uncanny female body. The two kings in their boyhood represent two masculine Selves, each serving as the other’s mirror—the boy sees in his playmate an honest reflection of his own perfect masculinity. The phrase “innocence for innocence” further visualizes this mirror relationship between the two boys. Echoing each other, they affirm their masculine identities as they strengthen their homosocial bond. As indicated by the allusion to the sun, the natural world is also perceived as purely masculine. The absolute absence of the feminine in this world allows

the boys to claim exemption from the taint of original sin. This boyhood paradise is lost when they enter manhood, yet Polixenes's visit allows them to temporarily return to childhood and thus reunite with their unadulterated masculinity.

Leontes and Polixenes, however, find themselves in a liminal state at the beginning of the play; that is, they are about to separate. The physical separation between the two brothers thus becomes a traumatic reenactment of their initial separation from that purely masculine boyhood. Moreover, male separation is seen as a direct result of female intrusion which signals the beginning of manhood: "their more mature dignities and royal necessities made separation of their society" (1.1.26-27). Polixenes's opening lines thus point to the anxiety-provoking presence of female sexuality which is about to tear apart the masculine world:

Nine changes of the watery star hath been
The shepherd's note since we have left our throne
Without a burden...

(1.2.1-3)

His language suggests that female sexuality is embodied in Hermione's pregnant body. "Nine changes of the watery star" indicates the length of pregnancy. Nine months ago, Polixenes and hence his twin brother Leontes are "without a burden"; that is, they leave behind "their more mature dignities and royal necessities" as they regress back into childhood. Yet nine months later, Hermione's sexualized maternal body comes between the two brothers, presenting them with a burden—the child she carries, and reminding them that their childhood play has come to an end. The urgency of the issue thus leads to the immediate separation from boyhood.

Furthermore, Hermione's pregnant body also serves as the proof of Leontes's contact with female sexuality and consequently his loss of masculine purity. Therefore, the feminine is to blame for the traumatic loss of boyhood innocence. Following this logic, Polixenes describes female sexuality as the "temptations" (1.2.77) that stir young men's "blood" (1.2.73), jeopardize

their masculine purity, and burden their souls with the weight of original sin. Hermione quickly responds to this subtly phrased accusation by making Polixenes's implicit language explicit, hence highlighting the absurdity of his argument:

Of this make no conclusion, lest you say
Your queen and I are devils. Yet go on,
Th' offenses we have made you do we'll answer,
If you first sinned with us, and that with us
You did continue fault, and that you slipped not
With any but with us.

(1.2.81-85).

By questioning the claim that men “slipped not with any but with” their wives, Hermione impugns the idealized vision of masculine purity and suggests that men should perhaps reflect upon their inner susceptibility to sin. Her speech, however, is interrupted by Leontes's impatient inquiry: “Is he won yet?” (1.2.85). Instead of taking in the new perspective Hermione offers, Leontes is anxiously fixated on his neurotic need for untainted masculinity, a fantasy he shares with his boyhood playfellow Polixenes. Meanwhile, Hermione's sexualized body and the burden she carries only intensify Leontes's anxiety towards female sexuality. While Hermione gently chides Leontes for arguing with Polixenes “too coldly” (1.2.30), Leontes abhors the passion Hermione shows in her speech, which he considers “too hot” (1.2.108). This contrast between cold and hot defines Leontes and Hermione as antithetical to each other. Leontes thus becomes increasingly antagonistic to the dangerous female sexuality, as he sees in Hermione the kind of “Promethean heat” (*Othello*, 5.2.12) that thaws masculinity. To Leontes, the act of seeing has tremendous significance:

There may be in the cup
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
Is not infected; but if one present
Th' abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known

How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
 With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.
 (2.1.39-45)

Leontes equates seeing with knowing; his own subjective perception carries more weight than the objective reality. Therefore, at this particular moment of separation and loss, Hermione's maternal body becomes in his eyes the "ocular proof" (*Othello*, 3.3.357) of her contaminating sexuality which, like the venomous spider, poisons his masculinity and purity.

Leontes's belief of Hermione's infidelity comes out of nowhere; he seems to have suddenly become delusional; in fact, he does describe his own suspicion as "the infection of my brains" (1.2.145). Furthermore, his delusions are compared to dreams:

Her. My life stands in the level of your dreams,
 Which I'll lay down.
Leo. Your actions are my dreams.
 You had a bastard by Polixenes,
 And I but dreamed it.
 (3.2.79-82)

Although Leontes claims that his "dreams" are grounded in the reality of Hermione's "actions," he himself also uses the dream metaphor to make sense of his own sourceless suspicion; he claims that his jealousy "communicat'st with dreams" (1.2.140). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud⁶ theorizes that a dream is the fulfillment of a wish. Indeed, Leontes's "dream" simultaneously fulfills two of his most urgent wishes. As previously discussed, Hermione's pregnant body signifies Leontes's sexual concourse with her, yet by imagining the adulterous relationship between Hermione and Polixenes, Leontes projects his own sexual sin onto his "twin brother" Polixenes. Therefore, "without a burden," Leontes is able to answer "not guilty" to heaven. Moreover, as Hermione becomes in his eyes the very embodiment of female sexuality which he seeks to destroy, her infidelity gives him a well-justified reason to execute

her, and by doing so, eliminate the contaminating female sexuality and restore the absolute purity of his masculine world.

Leontes therefore banishes both Hermione and Polixenes from the purely masculine world he recreates. This dream allows him to restore his masculine identity; however, it also inevitably leads to estrangement between him and his boyhood playmate, which, for Leontes, is yet another traumatic loss. Reflecting upon the significance of the imagined infidelity of Hermione, Leontes suddenly directs his attention to his son, Mamillius. Gina Bloom convincingly argues that from this moment on, “Mamillius begins to serve as a substitute for Polixenes, a new boyhood friend” who provides “the connection to boyhood that Polixenes once offered” (Bloom 340). Bloom observes that Leontes uses the language of play as he interacts with Mamillius:

Cleaning a smudge on his son’s nose, he calls Mamillius his “captain” (1.2.122; 123), as if they are engaging in an informal game of toy-soldiers (a game played as early as the fourth century). Mamillius eagerly engages with Leontes, interpreting his father’s query, “Are thou my calf?” (1.2.127) as a typical invitation to engage in make-believe play. Mamillius’s response, “Yes, if you will” (1.2.127), serves as a verbal sign of cooperation that, play theorists argue, is commonly used when children negotiate the rules of spontaneous imaginative ventures.

(Bloom 341)

Mamillius makes a perfect substitute for Polixenes. The boy’s youthful spirit “makes old hearts fresh” (1.1.41); that is, Leontes is able to re-experience his boyhood through engaging with his son. The boy thus serves as a source of “comfort” (1.2.208) for Leontes; his company alleviates the pain of separation. Moreover, the physical resemblance between the father and his son further strengthens the mirror relationship. The mirror image Mamillius provides allows Leontes to transport himself back to his boyhood:

Looking on the lines
Of my boy’s face, methoughts I did recoil

Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched,
 In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzled,
 Lest it should bite its master, and so prove,
 As ornaments oft do, too dangerous.
 How like, methought, I then was to this kernel,
 This squash, this gentleman.

(1.2.153-160)

If Polixenes is the twin brother who, despite all similarities, is still somewhat external to the masculine Self, then Mamillius represents the idealized version of the masculine Self. Studying Mamillius's face which so closely resembles his own, Leontes sees his son as a narcissistic reflection of his masculine identity. This perfect mirror image allows Leontes to "recoil / Twenty-three years" and reconnect with his boyhood. Leontes paints a portrait of his younger self, in which he associates boyhood with fierce masculinity, as he specifically refers to his "dagger" which, like a ferocious animal, bites everyone including even its master.

Leontes imagines a boyhood paradise in which one may find pure masculinity. However, this kind of masculinity unadulterated by femininity exists only in Leontes's fantasy. In reality, the masculine has its origin in the feminine. Ironically, boyhood is precisely the time of life during which masculinity is closely connected to femininity. Mamillius, who is perceived by Leontes as the embodiment of perfect masculinity, seems to enjoy the company of gentle ladies much more than the presence of his stern father. Addressing Leontes as "my lord", the boy shows polite yet distant manners around Leontes, which suggests that he considers Leontes not so much a father as a king. Mamillius appears to be rather reserved and obedient when he is with his father; he rarely speaks, and when he does speak, he gives very brief answers to Leontes's questions in a way that pleases Leontes.

Leo. Art thou my boy?
Mam. Ay, my good lord.
 (1.2.119)

Leo. Art thou my calf?

Mam. Yes, if you will, my lord.
(1.2.127)

Leo. Will you take eggs for money?

Mam. No, my lord. I'll fight.
(1.2.161-162)

Mamillius's exchange with his father seems rather forced and unnatural. By contrast, the boy behaves in a naturally child-like manner around his mother. He feels so comfortable and at ease that he reveals the mischievous side of him, which really tries his mother's patience:

Her. Take the boy to you; he so troubles me,
'Tis past enduring.
(2.1.1-2)

Furthermore, Mamillius's playfellows are two ladies, which directly contradicts Leontes's idea that boyhood play is entirely masculine. As indicated by the image of the twinned lambs frisking in the sun, Leontes sees boyhood pastimes as dominated by physical activities, whereas Mamillius is particularly fond of fairy tales. Instead of playing with toy soldiers, he engages himself in a discussion of eyebrow colors and shapes with the ladies—apparently, this little boy is very familiar with “women's faces” (2.1.12). Mamillius's boyhood differs dramatically from the purely masculine boyhood Leontes imagines. This intimate and playful scene between Mamillius and his female caretakers suggests that boyhood is in fact a primarily feminine phase of life. Masculinity is developed in the nurturing presence of the feminine. Therefore, pure masculinity is but a myth—masculinity and femininity have always been inseparable since the beginning of life.

The maternal body is the very source of physical and psychological nourishment; when bereaved of the feminine, the masculine cannot sustain itself and eventually collapses. When

Hermione is “barred, like one infectious” (3.2.96) from his son, Mamillius suffers traumatic deprivation.

Conceiving the dishonor of his mother,
 He straight declined, drooped, took it deeply,
 Fastened and fixed the shame on't in himself,
 Threw off his spirit, his appetite, his sleep,
 And downright languished.

(2.3.12-16)

If Mamillius, in his boyhood, symbolizes pure masculinity, then the masculine Self loses its strength and vitality without the presence of the feminine Self. Moreover, Mamillius, who is very conscious of the link between masculinity and femininity, “fastened and fixed the shame on't in himself.” Unlike Leontes and Polixenes who, in their fantasy, answer boldly “not guilty,” Mamillius, being aware of the tragic reality, sees in himself the taint of original sin. The horror of recognizing the imperfection of his soul adds another layer of anguish onto the pain he experiences due to the loss of his loving mother. The boy dies in “fear” (3.2.141) and distress. The tragedy of Mamillius indicates how frail the masculine Self is when deprived of the nurturing feminine presence.

Hermione calls Mamillius the “first fruits of my body” (3.2.95), which further illustrates the intimate connection between the masculine Self and the maternal body. The death of her child is thus “mortal” (3.2.145) to her. Part of Hermione dies as the fruits of her body perish, and therefore “one grave shall be for both” (3.2.234). At the cost of his own son's life, Leontes achieves his fantasy; that is, he eradicates femininity from the world and creates a realm of “pure” masculinity. However, instead of returning to that boyhood in the sun, Leontes arrives in a world of eternal winter, where he finds “nothing but despair” (3.2.208). Paulina gives a description of the winter landscape: “Upon a barren mountain, and still winter / In storm

perpetual” (3.2.210-211). “Still” and “perpetual” signify a lack of change and growth, which further suggests the absolute absence of life—and hence the “barren mountain.” This static and sterile landscape evokes the idea of nothingness. As discussed in the previous chapters, nothingness is closely associated with female sexuality. The sexualized female body is perceived as the source of corruption and death. Therefore, female sexuality has to be annihilated, or else it would annihilate the world. Paradoxically, in *The Winter’s Tale*, the obliteration of female sexuality leads to winter, death, and “nothing but despair.” The first half of the play thus ends with the revelation that female sexuality is the flip side of female generativity; that is, eradicating female sexuality also extinguishes the great creating power of the feminine, thus plaguing the world with despair and death.

If in *Hamlet*, female sexuality is associated with death, then in *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare reexamines this association and suggests that what links female sexuality to death is not the intrinsic quality of the feminine, but the irrational male fear of the sexualized female body. Meanwhile, Shakespeare remains highly aware of the life-giving and life-sustaining power of the feminine throughout the play. Therefore, Hermione, the feminine Self in this play, is portrayed as not the embodiment of the demonized female sexuality, but the Mother figure who possesses generative powers. Polixenes alludes to the idea of female generativity in his opening speech:

And therefore, like a cipher,
 Yet standing in rich place, I multiply
 With one ‘We thank you’ many thousands more
 That go before it.

(1.2.6-9)

Without the feminine, the masculine is “like a cipher”; the image of a zero evokes again the idea of nothingness and resonates with the winter landscape that is incapable of organic growth. “Yet

standing in rich place,” that is, standing in the presence of the maternal figure, the masculine Self is thus able to “multiply” and enjoy great prosperity. Moreover, even when Leontes’s mind is infected with misogynistic ideas, he still recognizes in Hermione’s “bounty, fertile bosom” (1.2.113) the power of female generativity, which cannot be negated by misogyny. This power of creation is associated with the divine; as Susan Dunn-Hensley points out, Hermione, who is referred to as the “most sacred lady” (1.2.76), may be the very embodiment of the Virgin Mary. In short, the men in *The Winter’s Tale* show a very conflicted attitude toward the feminine Self. Even as they unjustly accuse her of being the devil, the temptress, and the adulteress, they are constantly aware of her great generative power and its intrinsic sacredness.

As the feminine Self in this play, Hermione is not just an inhuman symbol of female generativity. She is described as a warm, breathing statue—the perfect combination of humanity and divinity. In spite of her close association with the divine, her “veins / Did verily bear blood” (5.3.64-65). She carries with her the “Promethean heat” that also characterizes Desdemona. Indeed, Hermione is like Desdemona in that they both show a great capacity for compassion and forgiveness.

The Emperor of Russia was my father.
 Oh that he were alive, and here beholding
 His daughter’s trial! that he did but see
 The flatness of my misery; yet with eyes
 Of pity, not revenge!

(3.2.117-121)

Hermione’s wish for “pity, not revenge” is especially poignant. Even though her previous speech does powerfully articulate her anger at Leontes’s tyranny— “I tell you / ’Tis rigor, and not law” (3.2.111-112), at this vital moment when her fate is about to be determined by the oracle, she simply asks for pity for herself and perhaps also for her husband, instead of seeking revenge on

him who has treated her infernally. The difference between “pity” and “revenge” also illustrates the distinction between the feminine Self and the masculine Self. The ghost of King Hamlet asks his son to “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (*Hamlet*, 1.5.25). Similarly, Othello cries: “Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!” (*Othello*, 3.3.444). Shakespeare’s heroines, by contrast, temper their anger with sympathy for themselves as well as empathy for others, which leads them to forgive and even embrace their persecutors.

Moreover, Desdemona asserts that “his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love” (*Othello*, 4.2.159-160). Hermione expresses a similar sentiment: “To me can life be no commodity” (3.2.91). Both Desdemona and Hermione believe in something that transcends life and death; for Desdemona, it is romantic love, whereas for Hermione, it is familial love. Before Hermione alludes to her late father who seems to be a source of comfort and strength for her, she reflects upon her life and thinks particularly of her two children:

The crown and comfort of my life, your favor,
 I do give lost; for I do feel it gone,
 But know not how it went. My second joy
 And first fruits of my body, from his presence
 I am barred, like one infectious. My third comfort,
 Starred most unluckily, is from my breast,
 The innocent milk in its most innocent mouth,
 Haled out to murder.

(3.2.92-99)

In her speech, Hermione refers to Leontes’s love for her as his “favor” and compares it to “the crown and comfort of my life”; by equating romantic love with “comfort,” she undermines its emotional intensity. Furthermore, her language suggests that she abandons this “comfort” of her own free will when she first senses the change in his “favor.” Although she ascribes great significance to his love for her by calling it the crown of her life, she is willing to “give lost,” since priority may change, and Hermione’s priority does change when she becomes a mother.

What she is unwilling and perhaps unable to “give lost” are the fruits of her body, which are essentially part of herself. Her language emphasizes the physical as well as psychological intimacy between the mother and her children, as she describes the natural process of breastfeeding.

This intimate bond between the mother and the daughter lies at the heart of *The Winter's Tale*. When Hermione comes back to life, she only gives one speech in which she warmly addresses her daughter Perdita:

You gods, look down
 And from your sacred vials pour your graces
 Upon my daughter's head! Tell me, mine own.
 Where hast thou been preserved? where lived? How found
 Thy father's court? For thou shalt hear that I,
 Knowing by Paulina that the oracle
 Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved
 Myself to see the issue.

(5.3.121-128)

This speech shows a mother's infinite love and care for her daughter. The repetition of the word “preserved” seems to suggest that both the mother and the daughter acquire the strength to stay alive in this hostile world from their love for each other. Moreover, Hermione's turning away from her husband to speak with her daughter indicates the shift of focus from heterosexual romance to female kinship. The mother-daughter relationship can be further generalized to the intimate connection among all women. When the bond of marriage is broken, Hermione seeks comfort from the company of her female friends: “My women may be with me, for you see / My plight requires it” (2.1.117-118). The women also empathetically respond to their mistress's misery; they weep for her; Paulina, in particular, actively speaks for her. In this play, Shakespeare moves away from the tragic theme of heterosexual romance, which, with its emphasis on the woman's unconditional love for the man, serves the masculine Self, not the

feminine Self. With the feminine as its fulcrum, *The Winter's Tale* celebrates femininity on both an individual and a communal level.

The first half of the play ends with Hermione's "death," which signals the loss of femininity. The lack of female generativity thus leads to the absence of life—"the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" (3.2.133). The oracle, however, also hints at the possibility of finding again "that which is lost." The lost femininity is embodied in Perdita, whose name means "the lost girl." Perdita's presence compensates for Hermione's absence, as Perdita says: "Dear queen, that ended when I but began" (5.3.45). The continuity of the feminine Self is thus made possible by the intimate connection between the mother and the daughter. In his book *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, E. M. W. Tillyard⁷ describes the special relationship between Perdita and Hermione as follows: "She is Hermione's true daughter and prolongs in herself those regenerative processes which in her mother have suffered a temporary eclipse" (Tillyard 47). Therefore, Perdita becomes the new symbol of female generativity. When she first comes to this world, she is described as "a daughter, and a goodly babe, / Lusty, and like to live" (2.2.25-26). The infant girl's lust for life further strengthens the connection between femininity and new life.

Moreover, Perdita differs from Hermione in that Perdita, who is closely associated with the pastoral landscape, acquires her generative power from "great creating Nature" (4.4.88). In *The Winter's Tale*, Nature possesses the power of creation and recreation. The play draws a parallel between seasonal changes and the cycle of death and rebirth.

Sir, the year growing ancient,
Not yet on summer's death, not on the birth
Of trembling winter...

(4.4.79-81)

The idea that "summer's death" gives birth to the "trembling winter" implies that life and death are both part of a larger cycle; the process itself echoes the seasonal changes in nature.

Moreover, the transition from winter to spring also hints at the idea of rebirth—somehow life can be restored under the influence of “great creating Nature.” While appreciating nature’s lavishness in producing flowers, Perdita starts with “rosemary and rue” (4.4.74), the “flow’rs of winter” (4.4.79), and ends her speech with the “flow’rs o’ th’ spring” (4.4.114). Through depicting the natural transition from winter to spring, she traces the ongoing cycle of death and rebirth, which she considers a natural process just as the seasonal changes.

Per. O, these I lack,
 To make you garlands of, and my sweet friend,
 To strew him o’er and o’er!

Flo. What, like a corse?

Per. No, like a bank for love to lie and play on;
 Not like a corse; or if, not to be buried,
 But quick and in mine arms.

(4.4.127-132)

Perdita evokes in her speech the image of a corpse that is, however, “not to be buried, / But quick and in mine arms.” She imagines a state in between life and death, which is filled with the possibility of resurrection. If Hermione embodies female generativity, then Perdita, as a rich character herself, symbolizes the regenerative process that restores life to the waste land and heals the wound caused by the destructive force of the masculine.

The return of Perdita to Sicilia thus sets the stage for the resurrection of Hermione. At the end of the play, Hermione reappears as a statue that “coldly stands” (5.3.36). This lifeless statue resonates with the image of “monumental alabaster” (*Othello* 5.2.5) in *Othello*. Yet by bringing Hermione back to life, Shakespeare undoes the error in his tragedy. Instead of extinguishing that “Promethean heat,” the masculine Self in *The Winter’s Tale*, after spending sixteen winters in repentance, finally learns to appreciate the “warm life” of the feminine Self, as

he wishes her veins to “bear blood” (5.3.65) again. Her warmth, which is associated with the heat of female sexuality, is now considered something as natural and “lawful as eating” (5.3.111).

The recuperation of Hermione therefore also resolves the conflict between sanctity and sexuality in that the two coexist in this sacred statue made of warm flesh.

The acceptance of female sexuality enables the smooth transition from tragedy to romance. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare balances the woman’s unconditional love for the man with the man’s revelation that masculinity and femininity are essentially inseparable. The masculine Self is thus defined in relation to the feminine Self, as Florizel indicates in his speech: “Thou dearest Perdita...I cannot be / Mine own, not anything to any, if / I be not thine” (4.4.40-45). Therefore, romance in this play, characterized by mutuality, signifies the reconciliation between the masculine Self and the feminine Self. The play thus ends with the union of Leontes and Hermione, Florizel and Perdita, and Camillo and Paulina—three couples who, having gone through winter, finally arrive in spring. Moreover, *The Winter’s Tale* suggests that love may exist in more than one form. The play proposes the idea of female kinship, which is represented by the mother-daughter relationship between Hermione and Perdita, as well as the female friendship between Hermione and Paulina. The bond between women is depicted as strong and genuine. The play therefore redefines love as a concept encompassing both female kinship and heterosexual romance, celebrating the generative and transformative power of love:

Besides, you know,
Prosperity’s the very bond of love,
Whose fresh complexion and whose heart together
Affliction alters.

(4.4.576-579)

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Epilogue

This thesis tells the stories of three Shakespearean heroines: Ophelia, Desdemona, and Hermione. Each represents a different type of feminine selfhood. Ophelia's femininity is closely associated with flowers. Like the fresh "rose of May" (*Hamlet* 4.5.157), she is "forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting, / The perfume and suppliance of a minute, / No more" (*Hamlet* 1.3.8-10). Her perishable beauty echoes the frailty of women. Under the destructive influence of the masculine, her sense of self eventually collapses. Her madness almost seems like a cathartic release, yet the intense passions she expresses soon consume her delicate frame. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare paints the picture of a girl who is oftentimes confused, humiliated and injured by her own tragic fate over which she has completely lost control. The image of Ophelia returns in *The Winter's Tale* in the shape of Perdita. In *The Crown of Life*, G. Wilson Knight¹ observes that Perdita is "rather like Ophelia in a very different context" (Knight 103). Both Ophelia and Perdita are girls in their springtime of life; their beauty is compared to the spring flowers. However, Perdita, closely attached to the pastoral landscape, shows a kind of earthy strength which the "celestial" (*Hamlet* 2.2.110) Ophelia lacks. Therefore, "the weeping brook" (*Hamlet* 4.7.175) that devours Ophelia in *Hamlet* reemerges in *The Winter's Tale* as Perdita's riverbank where life is restored.

Shakespeare establishes a similar parallel between Desdemona and Hermione. Both Desdemona and Hermione exemplify admirable feminine strength. Desdemona shows great determination in her speech:

Unkindness may do much,
 And his unkindness may defeat my life,
 But never taint my love.
 (*Othello* 4.2.158-160)

The unfaltering love Desdemona bears Othello manifests her extraordinary ego strength; as a result, she is able to unconditionally forgive his unkindness and return his cruelty with love and compassion. Similarly, a mother's infinite love for her child allows Hermione to preserve herself and endure sixteen long winters with nothing but a faint "hope" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.127) of her daughter being still alive. The two women's fates are, however, drastically different, if not entirely contrary. Desdemona's absolute devotion to her husband leads her to her tragic demise, whereas Hermione not only preserves her life but also experiences a spiritual resurrection when she reunites with her daughter. In this thesis, I do not want to draw a conclusion that would inevitably elevate one form of love yet undermine the other; to me, both Desdemona and Hermione have causes that are valid and moving in their own ways.

The individual journeys of Ophelia, Desdemona, and Hermione together outline the overarching trajectory of the feminine Self in Shakespearean tragedy and romance. Shakespeare's portrayal of the feminine Self changes and evolves over time as he explores in his plays the concepts of the Self and the Other, the masculine and the feminine, and the issues surrounding female sexuality. Eventually, the "green girl" (*Hamlet* 1.3.101) Ophelia represents matures into the Mother figure embodied in Hermione, whose wrinkled face reflects the feminine strength and wisdom she has accumulated through enduring her suffering with patience. Hence, aging is not only a gradual movement towards death, but also a process of achieving maturity and integrating the Self.

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