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The Sexual Desdemona: Two Adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Othello*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of adaptation, particularly in relation to William Shakespeare's *Othello*, examining how adaptations are not mere imitations but independent reinterpretations shaped by new contexts. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as "recontextualization," the study highlights the creative process involved in adapting texts, where fidelity to the source is secondary to innovation. This study focuses on two adaptations: Oliver Parker's 1995 film *Othello* and Paula Vogel's 1993 play *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*. Parker's film emphasizes sensuality, using cinematographic techniques to foreground Desdemona's sexual power, whereas Vogel's feminist reimagining presents Desdemona as a sexually adventurous, discontented woman navigating societal constraints. By analyzing these adaptations, the paper underscores how shifting mediums and perspectives transform audience perceptions of the original work. Ultimately, it argues that adaptations breathe new life into classic texts, showcasing the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation.

Introduction:

The Legacy of Shakespeare and the Art of Adaptation

William Shakespeare's reputation as one of the greatest playwrights in English literature has made his works a frequent subject of revisions and adaptations. Linda Hutcheon asserts that adaptations are "so much part of Western culture that they seem to affirm Walter Benjamin's insight that 'storytelling is always the art of repeating stories'" (2). Adaptations are often viewed as imitations of the original text, with a hierarchical relationship in which the source is seen as the authentic or superior version. Negative perceptions of adaptation arise from "thwarted expectations," either from fans seeking fidelity to the original or from educators needing close alignment with the source text for teaching purposes (Hutcheon 4).

However, widely recognized works often enable their adaptations to be judged on their own merit. For example, while millions watched the 2002 film *Adaptation*, directed by Spike Jonze and starring Nicolas Cage, far fewer knew

it was based on Susan Orlean's 1998 nonfiction book *The Orchid Thief*. Those unaware of Orlean's book rarely compared it to the film to assess originality or fidelity. Even so, the source text's influence often "shadows the one we are experiencing directly," establishing an overt relationship between the two (Hutcheon 6). This view, however, requires reconsideration, as adaptations should not be evaluated solely based on their faithfulness to the original. Instead, they are independent creations that emphasize specific aspects of the source. The adapter acts as an interpreter, not a replicator of the original work. Fischlin and Fortier describe the adapter's role as "fitting [the adapted text] to a new context," a process known as "recontextualization" (3).

Critics and theorists suggest that adaptations, whether written or cinematic, should be understood within their new contexts rather than as acts of "borrowing." Philosopher Jacques Derrida defines "iterability" as "the power of being transferred from one specific context to another" (Norris 109). He argues that all acts of writing and meaning inherently transcend their original context, unfolding in infinite new settings where their significance continually changes (Fischlin 5). Thus, adaptations should be viewed as creative processes involving reinterpretation and re-creation (Hutcheon 8). This transformation may involve shifts in medium—such as converting a play into a film—or maintaining the same medium with innovative reinterpretations.

"Recontextualization" and the Two Adaptations of *Othello*

This paper examines the process of "recontextualization" through the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, focusing on how Desdemona's portrayal in adaptations alters audience perceptions of the original work. The study analyzes three texts: Shakespeare's *Othello*, Oliver Parker's 1995 film adaptation, and Paula Vogel's 1993 off-Broadway play *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*. Parker's adaptation shifts from Shakespeare's "telling" mode to a "showing" cinematic medium, while Vogel's play remains in the "telling" mode of the original text but introduces a feminist reinterpretation. By focusing on Desdemona's characterization, the paper highlights how adaptations reshape audience engagement with Shakespeare's tragedy.

Shakespeare's plays have been adapted and reinterpreted for nearly four centuries, with countless variations across different mediums. Interestingly, Shakespeare himself was an adapter, transforming existing materials into new artistic creations. *Othello* "was written between 1602 and 1604, soon after *Hamlet* and not long before *King Lear*" (Bevington 303). It is one of Shakespeare's works that has captivated playwrights, screenwriters, and directors. Even *Othello* is an adaptation. According to Bevington, "Shakespeare found the plot in Giraldi Cinthio's collection of tales, *Hecatomithi* (1565) . . . Cinthio's is a sordid, melodramatic tale of sexual jealousy" (303).

This study examines two adaptations of *Othello*: Oliver Parker's 1995 film *Othello* and Paula Vogel's 1993 play *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*. Parker's film, starring Laurence Fishburne, Irene Jacob, and Kenneth Branagh, premierred during the 1995 Christmas season (Hodgdon 65) and marked Fishburne as "the first black actor

to play the role in a major film" (Maslin C11). While Parker's adaptation stays relatively close to Shakespeare's text, it eliminates and rearranges some scenes. (Kolin 65). Building on Fishburne passion and the beauty of Irene Jacob's Desdemona, "Parker developed a highly erotic *Othello*. His film was incontrovertibly rated 'R.' The way Parker interpreted Shakespeare's script evocatively foregrounded the sensual" (Kolin 65). Through cinematic techniques, Parker foregrounds sensuality, crafting a highly erotic interpretation of *Othello* distinct from Shakespeare's portrayal of Desdemona.

Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* presents an even more radical reinterpretation, reimagining the character of Desdemona in a feminist, postmodern context. In this revisionist account, Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca navigate their own counterplot behind the scenes of *Othello*. Given its "first staged reading in October 1987 at Cornell University with Vogel herself directing, the play has been restaged by, among others, the Bay Street Theater Festival in Sag Harbor, New York, and in November 1993 at the Circle Repertory Theater in New York City" (Fischlin 234). Vogel's *Desdemona* has been called "a rollicking, bawdy, postmodern, feminist reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* with no male characters" (Peterson 341).

Desdemona, a sexually adventurous Venetian woman, seeks independence and excitement, frequenting Bianca's brothel and yearning for the freedoms enjoyed by men. Disillusioned with her marriage to the exotic and dark-skinned Othello, Desdemona conspires with Emilia, her devoted servant, to escape her confining life. Vogel's bold portrayal reframes Desdemona as a defiant, liberated character who directly contrasts Shakespeare's more traditional depiction. The play ends with Desdemona, made acutely aware of her husband's jealousy, plans to feign sleep because she is certain that he is not to kill a sleeping woman. But when she goes to her bed, Emilia starts brushing her mistress's hair and counts from the number One. The ending line of the play is Emilia's uttering numbers endlessly.

This study analyzez *Othello* and its two adaptations through the lens of how Oliver Parker and Paula Vogel reinterpret and recontextualize the character of Desdemona. Both adaptations present a transformed Desdemona who aligns more closely with Iago's accusations in Shakespeare's play—depicting her as a sexual and unfaithful woman. The twentieth-century adaptations by Parker and Vogel add new layers to Desdemona's character, offering audiences and readers a contemporary perspective distinct from Shakespeare's original vision.

Shakespeare's Desdemona

Before examining how the two adaptations alter Desdemona's character, it is important to first understand Shakespeare's portrayal of Desdemona. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona is the only character whose actions align with her true nature: "the heart and the hand go together; she is what she seems to be. Ironically, she alone is accused of pretending to be what she is not . . . and her chastity is brought into question in a world where every other major character is in some degree touched with sexual corruption" (Kernan lxiv).

Desdemona's devotion to her duties as a wife is evident when she tells her father, in front of Venetian society's generals and elites, that her loyalty must first lie with her husband. She states:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you. You are the lord of duty;
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my
husband,
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.182-91)

This statement highlights that Desdemona can never be doubted as an unfaithful wife. Iago's accusation of infidelity only gain traction because Othello, feeling inferior to her due to her beauty and high status, believes he is unworthy of her. Her noble character, however, transcends such superficial concerns, like racial differences. Tragically, she is murdered for a sin she did not commit. She cannot be grouped with the women Iago accuses her of being like, and even the mere suggestion of it pains her. She tells to Emilia, ". . . I cannot say 'whore:' / It does abhor me now I speak the word: / To do the act that might the addition earn / Not the world's mass of vanity could make me" (4.2.168-71). Throughout the play, Desdemona's faithfulness remains unquestionable, even in the face of Othello's false accusations, and as the audience, we continue to trust in her integrity.

Oliver Parker's Desdemona

Oliver Parker's adaptation of *Othello* distorts the pure image of Desdemona seen in Shakespeare's play. In his film, Parker heavily cuts and rearranges scenes, and uses flashbacks, to create a "highly graphic, intensely erotic" experience (Kolin 65). As Potter notes, "Parker cut nearly fifty percent of the text and provided plenty of visual excitement to accompany what remained" (193). The rearrangement of scenes plays a key role in emphasizing Desdemona's sexuality. For instance, Parker includes an explicit shot of a couple engaging in sexual intercourse in a crude wagon, followed by a scene where Iago whispers to the passive Roderigo that Desdemona loves Cassio (28:30). The film then cuts to an image of Desdemona laughing up at Cassio as they dance. As Hodgdon observes, "juxtaposing the two spaces permits the one to bleed over into the other, serving, finally, less to mark the difference between 'romance' and 'sex' or between what occurs in each" (67). It is this connection between Desdemona's dance and the couple's sexual act which makes Desdemona's sexuality connotated; it blurs the line between romance and sexuality.

A few minutes later, Parker again uses visual techniques to focus on Desdemona's body as a sexual object in the "bed scene" (31:40). The camera shows Othello, bare to the waist, removing his boots while Desdemona takes off her slippers. Both "appear equally eager to consummate their marriage" (Hodgdon 67). As Othello undoes his belt, Desdemona steps back, enticing him to come closer. The camera angle, showing Othello from behind, reveals Desdemona's exposed breast. Although she is in her marital bed, this portrayal of Desdemona "gives the role a new dimension—for a sexual Desdemona can create sexual worries" (Kolin 65). These worries, however, are not based on real acts of infidelity, but rather are psychological doubts in Othello's mind.

Initially, Othello is reluctant to believe Iago's accusations. However, Iago's repeated attempts to tarnish Desdemona's reputation cause Othello to become increasingly suspicious with the image of Desdemona's smile while she dances with Cassio in his mind. The flashback technique intensifies the emotional impact of the scene: "An extreme close-up of Iago's profile is matched by one of Othello's eyes, which keys a flashback cut-in of Desdemona laughing up at Cassio as they dance" (53:08). This flashback positions Othello in a state of heightened jealousy, prompting him to create another imagined "bed scene." In this instance, Othello, dressed similarly to the first scene, approaches a white-curtained bed with a knife, parting the curtains to reveal Desdemona and Cassio in a compromising position.

Barbara Hodgdon comments on the way Parker uses Desdemona's sexualized body, stating that the repeated imagery of her body makes her "an especially contradictory ground for engendering fantasy." She is depicted in two contradictory ways: first as a confident woman who speaks before the senators and tries to calm her father, and second "shows her open smile transformed by Othello's licentious imaginings, scripted by Iago. The film uses (and uses up) her body to feed those fantasies. (70)

In Parker's adaptation, Desdemona is transformed, in Othello's fantasies, into a promiscuous woman. While Shakespeare's Othello imagines the same thing, the visual portrayal of Desdemona's body in intimate situations makes it difficult for the audience to continue viewing her as the faithful wife she is portrayed as in the original play. Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that in adaptations from print to performance, from the "telling" to the "showing" mode "the emphasis in usually on the visual, on the move from imagination to actual ocular perception" (40). This visual shift challenges the audience's belief in Desdemona's fidelity, creating doubt and prompting the question: why not?

Paula Vogel's Desdemona:

In Oliver Parker's *Othello*, Desdemona's supposed promiscuity exists solely within the realm of fantasy, but in Paula Vogel's *Desdemona*, it is a reality. By shifting the focus away from the tragic hero, Vogel "foregrounds and enacts the threat of female desire that incites the tragic action, and disrupts the familiar categories of virgin, whore, and faithful handmaiden by forging links with gender ideology and class status" (Friedman, *Revisioning* 131).

Vogel's Desdemona is a stark departure from Shakespeare's portrayal, presenting a character who is morally more flawed than the one Iago paints her to be. From the outset, she exhibits a playful, even provocative side in her conversations with Emilia. She expresses frustration with Othello's jealousy and accusations, particularly regarding Michael Cassio. Emilia teasingly notes that Cassio is "[t]he only one [Desdemona hasn't] had" (238), to which Desdemona retorts that she's not interested in him, not out of moral restraint but rather out of desire: "And I don't want him, either" (Vogel 238).

In Vogel's adaptation, Desdemona embraces her sexual freedom without restraints or remorse, even rejecting the concept of honesty in the context of adultery. She boldly declares: "What does honesty have to do with adultery? Every honest man I know is an adulterer" (242). For her, sex is not merely for pleasure but a form of rebellion against the societal confinement of women. She criticizes the restrictive roles assigned to women, describing them as "clad in purdah . . . decent, respectable matrons, from the cradle to the altar to the shroud . . . bridled with linen, blinded with lace" and bound by societal norms that limit their freedom (242). This drives her attraction to Bianca, whom she sees as a symbol of independence: "[S]he's a free woman – a new woman – who can make her own living in the world, who scorns marriage for the lie that it is" (242).

Marriage, for Desdemona, represents a form of enslavement, where she loses her autonomy. Adultery becomes her means of escaping this "prison," and of fulfilling her "desire to know the world" (242). She visits Bianca's brothel to experience a sense of liberation, engaging with men of various appearances and backgrounds. These encounters serve as a form of mental and emotional escape, where she imagines herself traveling through different worlds: "And they spill their seed into [her]… seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And [she] simply lie[s] there in the darkness, taking them all into [her]. [She] close[s] [her] eyes and in the dark of . . . mind – oh, how [she] travel[s]" (242-3). For Desdemona, sexual encounters are not about satisfaction; they are about the freedom to experience and connect with worlds she could never otherwise access.

Desdemona's exposure to different worlds through sexual experiences leads her to prefer Bianca's lifestyle over her own. She mistakenly believes Bianca avoids the constraints of marriage. She asks her, "Oh, Bianca—oh, surely… you're not the type that wants to get married?" (250). Bianca's response challenges this assumption: "All women want t'get a smug, it's wot we're made for, ain't it? We may pretend different, but inside ev'ry born one o' us want smugs an' babies, smugs wot are man enow t' keep us in our place" (250). Bianca's acknowledgment that marriage is seen as a woman's natural path frustrates Desdemona, who replies, "I don't think I can stand it" (250). This view contradicts Shakespeare's Desdemona, who honors marriage and duty to her husband. In Vogel's version, however, Desdemona's respect for marriage is undermined. By the end of the play, Desdemona is murdered for her devotion.

Vogel's Desdemona learns from Shakespeare's Desdemona that her own freedom outweighs the societal expectations of women in marriage.

From the outset of Vogel's play, Desdemona's unhappiness in her marriage is apparent. Her conversation with Emilia in the eighth scene reveals the abusive behavior of patriarchs toward women. Emilia comments on the volatile nature of men, saying, "men get itchy heat rash in th' crotch, now and then; they get all snappish, but once they beat [women], it's all kisses and presents the next morning—well, for the first year or so" (241). Desdemona responds that, in addition to physical abuse, the patriarch offers sex. She remarks that Othello "is much too miserly to give [her] anything but his manhood" (241). In scene five, when Desdemona goes to see her husband, "*we hear the distinct sound of a very loud slap. . . .and DESDEMONA returns, closes the door behind her, holding her cheek. She is on the brink of tears"* (239). Such physical abuse is understood to be thello's reaction to his doubts about his wife's infedility. This depiction of abuse contrasts with Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello, where there is no mention of him physically harming Desdemona although he has the same doubts as Vogel's Othello. By adding this element, Vogel illustrates one of the reasons for Desdemona's disdain toward marriage: women are objectified by the patriarch. For Desdemona and Emilia, women serve as outlets for a man's emotions; when he is angry, he beats her; when he is passionate, he seeks intimacy.

Paula Vogel's sexual identity may contribute to her depiction of marriage as a trap in her adaptation, as well as her choice to eliminate male characters from the play. Vogel's candid acknowledgment of her sexuality reflects her boldness: "I don't hate being a lesbian woman playwright. I think there's no choice. And I'm aware that the thing has kept me out of a lot of theater companies, or has slowed down the progress of the career" (qtd. in Fischlin 233). Her portrayal of Desdemona as a sexually liberated woman can be seen as a rejection of the societal roles assigned to her. Vogel's gender politics aims not only to reveal how women are confined and oppressed but she is also devoted "to exposing not just how women are entrapped and oppressed, but to the possibilities that figures like Desdemona . . . [has] to contest, subvert and redefine the roles they have been assigned" (Savran xi).

In Vogel's play, Desdemona is no longer the innocent lover or the one "forgiving of all transgressions against her." Instead, she is "sexually adventurous . . . She is seemingly voracious in her appetites, manipulative of anyone who can feed them" (Friedman 118). This shift in Desdemona's character may stem from her tragic fate in Shakespeare's original, where she is killed for a crime she did not commit. Vogel seeks to reverse the roles in her adaptation, making Desdemona no longer a passive victim. Instead, she takes agency to resist the patriarchal oppression she faces, albeit in ways that reflect her own limitations. This transformation echoes the notion, as Savran notes, that "Shakespeare's women are not quite the innocent victims of masculine desires they appear to be but active makers" of their own destinies (x). The changes Vogel makes to Desdemona's character could imply a different ending from the original play. While Shakespeare's version leaves the audience knowing Desdemona will eventually be murdered, in Vogel's

adaptation she "has ceased to be a tragic or heroic icon and becomes an ordinary, if upper-class woman" who loses the audience's sympathy (Novy 70).

William Shakespeare's reputation as one of the greatest playwrights inevitably sparks controversy when his works are revisited or adapted, as Paula Vogel does in her play. Vogel's approach to Shakespeare's original text echoes the work of other writers, critics, readers, directors, and actors who have reinterpreted his plays, often through a feminist lens. This feminist perspective is the lens through which Vogel reimagines Shakespeare's *Othello*, offering a voice to the oppressed woman who deserves a play bearing her name. At the heart of the play, Vogel rewrites Shakespeare's *Othello* from the viewpoints of its female characters—Desdemona, of course, but also Emilia and the courtesan Bianca. This aligns with Vogel's feminist goal to create "fully dimensional" female characters, something she argues that male playwrights in the past have rarely done, or even attempted. Vogel aims to portray women as more than just daughters, wives, and mothers bound to private family roles (Pellegrini 476).

Vogel is inspired by the marginalization of women in *Othello*, as Dace notes, to give them "everything Shakespeare denies them: full portraits of the three women… high spirits that do not willingly suffer the men's foolishness" (qtd. in Fischlin 234). The adaptation also addresses contemporary issues, such as the danger of Desdemona's promiscuity, which could lead to AIDS, highlighting the play's exploration of modern concerns that Shakespeare could not have foreseen. This is the role of the adapter: to interpret contemporary circumstances and align them with historical themes and values, even when these are at odds with the current moment (Fischlin 18).

Conclusion

The order in which I have discussed the two adaptations does not follow a chronological sequence. I begin with Oliver Parker's *Othello*, even though it was released eight years after Paula Vogel's *Desdemona*. This choice is deliberate, as the degree to which these adaptations redefine Desdemona's character differs significantly. It felt less startling to first address the portrayal of Desdemona's sexuality as part of Othello's fantasies before transitioning to the morally opposite depiction of her as a "whore" in Vogel's work.

Both adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* stand as independent literary creations, even as they respond to a prior canonical text. While some might view Parker's film as a reproduction of the original with minor adjustments, both adaptations successfully "recontextualize" the source material, adapting it to fit new contexts. They serve as reminders that "there is no such thing as . . . an original genius that can transcend history, either public or private" (Hutcheon 111).

For those who mythologize Shakespeare's works as untouchable masterpieces, it is worth remembering that many of Shakespeare's plays themselves are adaptations. As Edward Said observes, literature operates as "an order of repetition, not of spontaneous and perpetual originality." While repetition theoretically implies sameness, in practice, it generates difference—manifesting in new ideas, perspectives, and contexts shaped by changing cultures, languages, and histories (354). These differences are natural, as adaptations inevitably reflect the era in which they are created. The reception of Shakespeare's works in the 20th century, for instance, differs dramatically from that of the 17th century. Reception and reader-response theories emphasize how the meaning of texts from the past evolves when they appear under new conditions (Fischlin 5). Adaptation, therefore, is an essential cultural activity that prioritizes reworking and reinterpretation in fresh contexts. This process is often more indicative of cultural development than notions of originality in creation or fidelity in interpretation.

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