

One and one is two, three is potency: the dynamics of the erotic triangle in *Othello*

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ABSTRACT

While in modern western culture the heterosexual couple is the paradigm of romantic love, the erotic triangle involving at least one homosexual trajectory of desire seems to be far more interesting and disturbing. Based on Eve K. Sedgwick's analysis of male homosocial desire in *Between Men* (1985), this essay inquires into the de(con)structive dynamics of the erotic triangle in Shakespeare's *Othello*. It sets out to explore the triangular constellation as not merely a strategy of the preservation of patriarchal power through male bonding but rather as Iago's favourite strategy of manipulation. Drawing on both contemporary discourses and the work of New Historicist scholarship, this essay establishes the socially accepted parameters within which the erotic triangle will work as a cover for homosocial/erotic/sexual desire – and beyond which it will enter the realm of the disorderly, and collapse.

Our culture is constructed around a set of dichotomies that regulate our thinking and our behaviour in significant ways. This is especially true for our assumptions about the relations of the sexes. In Western culture, the most accepted and, indeed, promoted relationship is that between a man and a woman, preferably institutionalized within marriage. This basic pattern of man and woman seems to comprehend a whole universe of binary oppositions such as Culture/Nature, Reason/Feeling, Public/Private, and so forth. Cixous (1986:63) quite rightly wonders in *The Newly Born Woman*, "Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought – all concepts, codes and values – to a binary system, related to 'the' couple, man/woman?" Yet in spite of its seeming universality, the diversity of the couple is one of a line between two points: there is A and B, or B and A. The introduction of a third term means an explosion of possibilities. The triangle resists the categorization into binary terms, it transgresses the boundaries produced by the dichotomous order, it opens up a third space, as Bhabha has it. Far from being merely a figment of postmodern thought, however, the triangle proves

to have always been a substantial part of Western narrative. In her seminal study of *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Garber (2000:423) contends that the fundamental romantic courtship narratives of Western culture are stories of how the lover 'won' the beloved from a rival or tragically failed to do so: "It is as though love can only be born through an obstacle."

Another scholar who works with the concept of the erotic triangle is Sedgwick. In her (1985) study of relationships between men, she sets out to discuss our culture in terms of "male homosocial desire." This concept acknowledges both the potentially erotic desire that inhabits social relationships between men and their uneasy situatedness within a radically disrupted continuum between *homosocial* and *homosexual*, a disruption that in our society manifests itself in ideological homophobia. One way Western culture has developed to guard relationships between men against the suspicion of – and maybe also the drifting into – a sexual bond, is what Sedgwick calls "obligatory heterosexuality" (p.3). Sedgwick draws here on cultural and anthropological studies by Lévi-Strauss, Gayle Rubin and Luce Irigaray, to name only a few, that have come up with the notion of "male traffic in women". In this account, women become exchangeable property with the primary purpose of cementing the bonds between men. Thus male homosocial desire is contained and, indeed, legitimated by the institution of marriage. In other words: The true partner of a marriage is the other man (pp.25-26).

If this is so, then the erotic triangle between two men and a woman enables our perception and analysis of male homosocial desire inscribed into a literary or other cultural text. It is the reading strategy Sedgwick applies to canonical literary texts from the seventeenth century onward to recover homosocial relationships between men. To this purpose, she employs the work of French cultural critic Girard, who acknowledges that the relation of erotic contest between two men is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of them to the female beloved. Girard suggests that the choice of the beloved is due to her already belonging to another man, who has been chosen as rival. This he calls "mimetic desire."¹ Sedgwick takes this notion a step further and develops it into an epistemological tool for reading the heterosexual relation chiefly as a strategy of male homoerotic desire. Taking

¹ For his own applications of the concept of mimetic desire, see Girard (1988, 1991). Girard himself does not include the dimension of homosexuality into his account but rather relegates it to the realm of the pathologic (1991:43). His declaration of mimetic rivalry as both cause and symptom of cultural disintegration (1991:166) is finely counterbalanced by Sedgwick's (1990:1) *Epistemology of the Closet* where she diagnoses male homosocial desire in the very centre of Western culture.

the male-male relations in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Wycherley's *The Country Wife* as her examples, she shows how heterosexual love and marriage can serve as a cultural space for bonding between men (Sedgwick 1985:28-66). On an abstract level, the triangles she finds consist of a male subject who desires an object of the same sex; in order both to get nearer the desired object and at the same time to cover up his homoerotic desire as purely social, the subject enters a heterosexual relationship with a woman who is close to the object – his daughter, his sister, his wife, or his lover.

Sedgwick argues convincingly that the erotic triangle is a means of maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power and as such is a stabilizing force of male-dominated societies (p.25). This stability, however, seems to be a precarious one. True, it is an underlying structure of patriarchal society and in its recurrence can certainly be said to have a stabilizing character. Yet it is neither ahistorical nor an expression of symmetric power relations. Rather, it exhibits a twofold asymmetry in that it ascribes social power along gender lines (men have power, women do not) and in the rupture of the continuum between homosocial and homosexual (nonsexual bonds between men, however intensely emotional, are accepted, sexual ones are not). Indeed, the moving of a homosocial relationship into an openly homosexual bond is what threatens the order of patriarchal society by subverting the power ascriptions and gender categories it is based on.

I would like to problematize the notion of the stability of the erotic triangle further by exploring it as a strategy of manipulation. As Sedgwick shows, the erotic triangle remains intact only as long as the relationships it contains move within socially accepted limits and thereby reinforce the existing norm. As soon as one of the triangular bonds subverts this order, for example by turning from homosocial to homosexual, the triangle disintegrates. This works the other way round, as well: the erotic triangle can be a strategy of dissolving an already existent relationship of two, say, a heterosexual couple, by releasing the dynamics of desire that are at work in a triangular constellation.

Since the erotic triangle is not an ahistorical, Platonic form, as Sedgwick explains, but an epistemological tool for the analysis of a nexus of power and sexuality that shapes social relationships at a specific historical moment, I would now like to undertake a reading of the dynamics of the erotic triangles in Shakespeare's *Othello*. My reading will be based on an analysis of the gender-discourses available at that historical moment. It is my aim to explore the erotic triangle not as a stabilizing, normative structure but to intervene at precisely those moments when the triangles engendered by Iago collapse and to ask, why this happens.

According to the triangular dynamics of rivalry and cuckoldry Sedgwick has explored, *Othello* should not be a tragedy at all. Othello,

Brabantio, Cassio, Roderigo and Iago are connected to each other in rivalry and putative adultery by Desdemona. Just as in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, so in *Othello*, too, the cuckoldry plot is the means by which men interact with each other. In Sedgwick's phrase, "'to cuckold' is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man" (1985:49). The adultery in *Othello* is not even an actual one, yet the assumed bond with a rival has real, and tragic, consequences – whereas in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, for example, rivalry with the lovely boy is what makes the dark lady attractive in the first place. Were *Othello* a tragicomedy in the vein of Fletcher's *Mad Lover*, then the Moor would after some comical and humiliating confusions (including cross-dressing on all sides) refrain from his improperly excessive love for a woman, realize that only friendship between men can make a man a man, go to the wars with Cassio and/or Iago by his side, and leave Desdemona at home with Emilia – a veritable "moth of peace" (Honigmann ed. 1997:1.3.258).

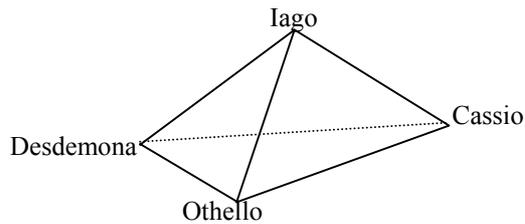
Iago as a master of manipulation knows how he has to play on the feelings and fears of others, and he does so by ingeniously placing them into several erotic triangles. Then what is the reason for the ultimate failure of the triangles he engenders? I would like to show that Iago's goal is a close homosocial bonding with Othello and that the miscarriage of this plan is due to the incapability of them both to perceive each other's desires.

Iago uses the triangle as a strategy of manipulation, as a means to split up a given unity of two, most notably the loving relationship between Othello and Desdemona. However, the play sets out with yet another close couple: Cassio has been promoted to the position of Othello's lieutenant in Iago's stead. Iago claims that it is this professional frustration that brings forth his hatred for both of them and serves as an explanation for his first intrigue. Before the middle of the play, Iago will have succeeded in making Othello suspend Cassio as his officer. Now *he* has Othello's trust, the position as lieutenant to the Moor seems secure. Iago has achieved his goal – or has he? As a matter of fact, his erstwhile 'official' motivation for his hatred of Othello has by now been complemented by a more private feud: according to unconfirmed rumours, he is being cuckolded by Othello. If motivated by jealousy, he would now have to replace the triangle Othello-Emilia-Iago by one in which he seduces Desdemona and cuckolds Othello. Yet just as professional envy before, private jealousy fades out of view if we take into account the discourse on women and marriage that Iago situates himself in.

Iago's view on women is marked by cynicism, contempt and indifference. The relation between the sexes belongs to the realm of sensuality, heterosexual love is to him merely "lust of the blood and

permission of the will” (1.3.335). Such love, as expressed by Roderigo for Desdemona, is a degrading lust. Only if man masters suchlike desires will he be able to pertain full humanity and masculinity. Iago opposes beastly sensuality to reason and proper self-love – his ideal is “a man that [knows] how to love himself” (pp.314-15). In this discursive context, self-love does not only mean egotism, but translates as easily into ‘love for someone like himself,’ that is, the preference of bonds between men before the ‘love’ of a woman. Iago presents himself throughout the play as a representative of a misogynistic discourse.

If he claims to be impelled by jealousy, then, we must construe this not as jealousy for a woman, but rather for a man – Othello. Iago’s professed fears of being cuckolded by another man get deconstructed further when he almost paranoically insists on it as an additional incentive for ruining Cassio: “For I fear Cassio with my night-cap, too” (2.1.305). This thought occurs to him towards the end of the soliloquy that shows him plotting the slandering of Desdemona’s honour (2.1.284-310). The erotic triangles he calls up in fast succession start with Cassio and Desdemona as one adulterous couple and end with Cassio and Emilia as another one. This unites Iago and Othello as being cuckolded by the womanizer Cassio. Looked at from a triangular point of view, it uncovers Othello as the true object of Iago’s desire and reveals his two rivals for Othello’s affection: Cassio as well as Desdemona. In order to achieve his goal, Iago has to manipulate two already existing couples he himself is excluded from. He does so by devising a constellation of intersecting erotic triangles that he himself controls:



In this constellation he ingeniously draws upon a triangle with a story: in Othello’s wooing of Desdemona, Cassio had often acted as mediator. Garber describes the vectors of desire Iago is reactivating here as “the Othello-Desdemona-Cassio triangle, in which Othello acknowledges desire for Desdemona and represses or sublimates desire for Cassio – so that it is easy for him to imagine Desdemona choosing Cassio over himself” (2000:454). Thus Iago is playing upon Othello’s anxiety that it might finally be him who will be pushed out of the triangle by Desdemona and Cassio, and it is indeed the course Iago’s intrigue aims at: to pair Desdemona and

Cassio off and receive Othello, who will by then be cured from his excessive infatuation for a woman, in an embrace of homosocial brotherhood.

And it looks as if Iago will succeed. Wayne (1991) identifies in her essay on "Misogyny in *Othello*" three different discourses on women and marriage in the play that are represented by the characters. Not surprisingly, she has Iago represent a residual, but still powerful discourse of misogyny; Desdemona the dominant discourse of companionate marriage, and Emilia an emergent discourse claiming full equality of the sexes. Wayne argues that by the middle of the play Othello has taken on Iago's misogynistic attitude. This is not only due to Iago's persuasiveness, but rather can be traced back to a contradiction inherent in the dominant discourse itself: the illusion of a total containment of women and their sexuality in marriage. While the ideology of marriage permitted husbands to view their wives as property and to construct their identity as ideally chaste and obedient, Wayne explains, it could not control women's desire. Since men's appropriation of women was never entire, jealousy arose from the contradictory claims of possession and desire. At the end of the day, this discourse suppresses women just as the misogynist one that claims that all women are whores and to be treated as such (Wayne 1991:173).

This certainly does account for the initial success of Iago's slander; whether it does explain the tragic outcome of the events, remains yet to be seen. Since the erotic triangles in Sedgwick's study work only as long as they move within socially accepted limits, I would now like to take an exemplary look at one central aspect in each discourse in order to find out in how far the relationships between Iago, Othello and Desdemona conform to their respective norms.

Let me begin with a quote from Becon's *Book of Matrimonye* (dating from 1584) which promotes an ideal of heterosexual exclusivity: "Let her not accustom herself to strange flesh [...], but content herself only with the love of her husband" (Aughterson ed. 1995:112). Heterosexual love as institutionalised in marriage is supposed to be characterized by exclusivity and chastity. Desdemona embodies the ideal of this discourse, she is "A maiden never bold,/ Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion/ Blushed at herself" (1.3.95-97) as her father maintains. Against all slandering she *is* chaste, faithful, obedient and, especially toward the end, silent. As regards exclusivity, the marriage of Othello and Desdemona certainly conforms to the norm. In respect to marital chastity, however, it turns out to be disorderly, a point already made by Greenblatt (1980:248).² Othello is ready to give up everything for his love of Desdemona, and indeed he does upset

² For an overview of contemporary notions of marital chastity, see Greenblatt (1980:247-49).

most of the men he is connected with, above all Brabantio, whom he loses as a friend and influential patron. He estimates the love and company of a woman higher than all the other homosocial relationships he is involved in. As Orgel has pointed out in his influential essay on cross-dressing on the English Renaissance stage, for a man to associate with women was felt to be increasingly dangerous: lust effeminates, makes a man incapable of his pursuits. This argument is grounded in the Galenic one-sex model according to which woman is but an imperfect man and can in exceptional cases develop toward complete manliness and humanity. By implication, this notion also carries what Orgel (1989:13-15) calls “the fantasy of its reversal”, that is, the conviction that men can turn *back* into women, too. We have encountered this notion already in Iago’s conversation with Roderigo where he perceives of heterosexual love as degrading lust. The threat of manliness lost and duties neglected surrounds Othello in his speech before the Venetian senate, too. The very fact that he feels the need to assure the assembly of a strict fulfillment of his duties as a soldier in spite of his wife’s presence at Cyprus testifies to this: “I therefore beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite [...] And heaven defend your good souls that you think / I will your serious and great business scant/ When she is with me” (1.3.262-269). His succumbing to womanly pleasures endangers his manliness, or as again Iago puts it: “His soul is so en fettered to her love / That she may make, unmake, do what she list, / Even as her appetite shall play the god / With his weak function” (2.3.340-343).

But Othello is not the only one to upset the gendered order. Kemp (1996) points out that Desdemona’s behaviour at the beginning of the play speaks of an active, independent mind that in a woman violates conventional gender assumptions. As Brabantio’s heir, she embodies a valuable commodity on the Venetian marriage market. Her elopement denies Brabantio the possibility to advance his social connections by marrying her to some “wealthy curled darling of [the] nation” (1.2.68) who would themselves climb a rung or two on the social ladder by acquiring her through marriage. Thus from the perspective of Brabantio in particular and Venetian society in general, Desdemona’s value is squandered on Othello, who is a man without a family or a nation. By giving herself in marriage, rather than being the object of exchange between two representatives of the patriarchy, she becomes a wasted token: no bond is established between families, clans, states, or nation. Desdemona also insists on being taken along to Cyprus, despite the impending war. Against Othello’s declaration that private pleasures and public office will be strictly separated, the scene of his reunion with Desdemona at Cyprus speaks yet another language. The troops there expect the arrival of their experienced, respected commander, “the warlike Othello” (1.3.27), in a situation of military crisis – what they get, however, is

a married man in love with his wife, who greets her as his “fair warrior” (2.1.280) first and foremost. Quite rightly the editor of the Arden edition wonders: “Is it significant that Othello turns first to Desdemona, though he arrives on official duty as governor?” (Honigmann 1997:174, note on line 180). You bet it is.

In their relationship, both Desdemona’s and Othello’s desire conflicts with contemporary notions of love, marriage and gender. Yet in the end it is Desdemona only who must be punished for her transgressions, “else she’ll betray more men” (5.2.6). While in this ideology adultery is the ultimate transgression and has to be punished by death, in the discourse of male homosocial bonding it represents one possibility for connecting with other men, as Sedgwick has shown. The criterion of exclusivity, then, is assessed differently: within the dominant ideology of marriage, it is the ideal – within the discourse of male bonding, it means a disorderly restriction and endangering of the homosocial net and, indeed, society itself – or as Bacon has put it in his essay “Of friendship”: “It is a mere and miserable solitude to want friends, without which the world is but a wilderness” (Smeaton ed. 1976:80).

Seen from this perspective, however, Iago’s desire is just as disorderly as Othello’s and Desdemona’s are: Instead of establishing and maintaining a net of homosocial bonds within which patriarchal power is perpetuated and asserted, he strives at having Othello’s affections exclusively to himself. Thus he repeatedly attempts to discredit all close homosocial relationships between Othello and other men. For example, when Othello’s friendship to Brabantio is at stake after he has eloped with Desdemona, Iago deepens the split between them further by insinuating that Brabantio secretly despises and ridicules Othello (1.2.4-10). He destroys Cassio’s career as Othello’s lieutenant by having him involved in a night-brawl while Cyprus is still on the alert (2.3). This neglect of duty costs him his place, the cuckoldry-plot devised by Iago will cost him his close friendship to Othello. This desire for exclusivity culminates in the scene in act 3 where Iago and his general exchange what is best described as ‘mock marriage vows.’ Iago has by now succeeded in convincing Othello of Desdemona’s guilt, in ‘infecting’ him with his misogynist discourse, as Wayne puts it (1991:173). It is also the scene in which Iago comes to expressing his feelings for Othello most directly. We see Othello kneeling down and swearing his love for Desdemona is dead –

Othello: Now by yond marble heaven
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words.

Iago: Do not rise yet. *Iago kneels.*
Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
To wronged Othello's service.
[...]
Othello: Now art thou my lieutenant.
Iago: I am your own forever.

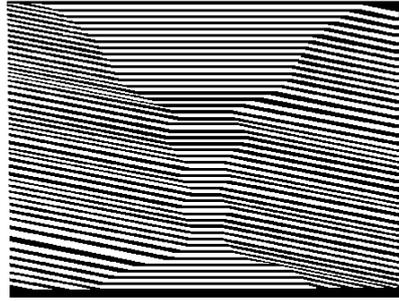
(3.3.463-482)

This is the moment when Iago usurps Cassio's place as Othello's lieutenant and confidant. What is more, Iago believes that he has also usurped Desdemona's place closest to Othello's heart; this notion makes him cast his oath of faith in words that recall the Anglican marriage service.

I would like to suggest again that the tragic ending of the play is due to the fact that Iago and Othello are blind for each other's desires. The erotic triangle as a strategy of male bonding between Iago and Othello meets with disaster since each acts within a discourse of his own that intersect but also differ and preclude each other in significant ways. The close look at the relationships in *Othello* I have just given corroborates this view. Wayne posits Othello's shift from a dominant discourse of companionate marriage into a misogynist discourse as the crucial movement in the play. Yet the point is perhaps less that one discourse is replaced by another one, especially since these discourses complement rather than contradict each other. Rather, the dividing line runs between homosociality and heteronormativity. Heterosexuality is the norm Wayne's essay advocates, too. She addresses the issue of gender *only* from a heterosexual point of view. Yet the discourses she correctly identifies are as much about the relation between the sexes as they are about the bonds between men. Misogyny, if looked at from this angle, means not only a pejorative reduction of heterosexual love to depraved lust; it also means the corresponding superiority of male friendship. This is where Iago's and Othello's inability to see each other's desires truly lies: Othello lives in a heteronormative world which makes sense to him only in terms of heterosexual relationships. Iago, on the other hand, recognizes his society as one structured by homosocial bonds, and responds to those only.

In this respect, both the play and the greater part of scholarly criticism about it posit a kind of *trompe-l'oeil* scenario. One of the simplest and best known examples of a *trompe-l'oeil* is the picture of a vase that is also a picture of two heads facing each other.³

³ Interestingly, this is also the logo the Gay Men's Press has chosen for its publications.



[source: Hotz-Davies, I. 1995: *Adversarial Stances: Strategies of Resistance in Selected Renaissance Texts*. Trier, WTV; cover.]

Depending on which stance we take towards *Othello*, the play reads either as the tragic failure of a heterosexual love or as the tragic failure of a homosocial desire. In the first case (the vase-picture, so to speak), the play is aptly named *The Tragedy of Othello* – in the second case (the two faces), it should instead be called *The Tragedy of Iago*.

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