

# Woman as Text in *Othello* and in Calderon's Dramas de Honor

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**A**s it usually happens with every discourse that results in oppression, misogyny has been able to efface its presence by inserting doubts on its own existence into the community in which it works. However, certain inevitable contradictions within patriarchalism have made possible some readings denying the hierarchy male/female, in spite of the degree of acceptance that such a "common sense" attitude has amongst many societies. The plays that we study here offer an expected ambivalent position, regardless what part of the most conservative criticism has wanted to see in them; on the one hand, these plays certainly reproduce the terms of the dominant cultural environment, and although much has been said about the terrible position in which women are placed in these texts, perhaps something could be added in relation to the way they are scripted by males. But, secondly, we perceive what seems to be an uneasy incorporation of the process of construction of the notions of gender in these texts, which force a sort of intervention that questions, although with not much strength, this discourse. Dymphna Callaghan reminds us of the difficulty of dealing with this topic in some kind of texts:

While we must remain wary of simplifying the complex nature of either woman's subordination or the privileged cultural representation of that subordination in tragedy, we cannot hedge about the historical fact that women were (and for that matter, remain) the diverse victims of multiple patriarchal strategies (41)<sup>1</sup>.

Woman has been explained, once she has been characterized as 'unknown', not as an independent entity, but from man, who sets what is 'normal', or 'natural', and from where woman is defined as her opposite. According to this it shouldn't surprise us that Don Lope de Almeida, in *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*<sup>2</sup>, when trying to praise his newly wed wife before the king, states that she is "noble" and "varonil" (III,445b). In the same way that the body politic of the Prince is privileged in relation to the subject, Louis Adrian Montrose points out how the dominant structures of thought and belief,

... also privileged the male body in relation to the female body. The versions of woman produced by such discourses as those of medicine, law, religion, and domestic economy were almost invariably imperfect versions of man - constitutionally colder, weaker, less stable than he. (308)<sup>3</sup>

*Othello* presents a woman who appears to be, up to a certain point, free from male prohibitions. Desdemona, or what some authors have called "the first Desdemona" (in the first act and part of the second), is defined, significatively by Brabantio, as "half the wooer", that is, active, self-sufficient and not reduced to a role. Her guilt-free eroticism, her strong personality, that allows her to face the most conspicuous repre-

sentation of patriarchalism in Venice, the Senate, in its own territory and on its own terms, and her love, decidedly, and apparently, unaware of any social or racial prejudices, all these characteristics speak of her as a female creation defying the position that the community has kept in store for her. On the other hand she accepts her position in the social scale to the extent of not endangering the mechanism that makes possible the transmission of power, i.e., marriage: her “divided duty” speech tries hard to reconstruct the concept of fidelity to a man, which has been questioned by her quiet but nevertheless active rebellion against her father. Ironically enough, it will be precisely her devoted acceptance of the obedience required of a wife what will eventually destroy her. Edward Snow has commented on this very lucidly in “Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in ‘Othello’”<sup>4</sup>

But the erotic principle in her is gradually transformed by “the curse of marriage” to a preoccupation with a fetish that confines her to a sphere of childlike, narcissistic isolation (...). From proclaiming her love as a free individual she is reduced by the domain of married chastity to defending her virtue as an object passively dedicated to her husband. (408)

It is from the moment she starts acting as a married woman (or, in other words, since the arrival in Cyprus), that we have the “second Desdemona”; she is rewritten by one of the most intensely ideologized institutions that exists: marriage produces, through a complex social mechanism, two new “individuals” that consequently have different social roles<sup>5</sup>. The existence of these two versions (active and passive, wild and domesticated) of the same woman in the play has traditionally puzzled critics and audience alike. For Carol Thomas Neely there is not such a division.<sup>6</sup>

Desdemona’s spirit, clarity, and realism do not desert her entirely in the latter half of the play as many critics and performances imply. (88)

For Neely there is a conciliation of “obedience and self-assertion” (1987: 88); if Desdemona doesn’t try to defend herself it is, Neely explains, because Othello is unable to articulate his suspicions. Another feminist critic as Adamson does distinguish two very different sides of the same character, but pointing out, at the same time, what she believes a process signalling both continuity within the character as well as difference<sup>7</sup>. Interesting as these views undoubtedly are, we consider of greater interest (and more coherent with the play) Alan Sinfield’s interpretation: the change from the complete lack of conventionality expressed by Desdemona’s Senate speech into the orthodox conventionality of the submissive wife of the General is too abrupt to be easily accepted<sup>8</sup>:

Desdemona does not seem to have such a continuous subjectivity; she is less a developing consciousness than a series of positions that women are conventionally supposed to occupy. (64)

From this point of view, Desdemona, and women in *Othello* at large, are not “individuals” (that is, “non divisible”), or beings with a specific identity, but rather men’s productions, and are built, re-written, made central or sent to the margins of society, by means of a discursive practice that has the main purpose of securing the privileged position of men in their community. But more than the abstract consequences of this male dominion over females, the play reveals certain instances of women used as pawns in a game that is not theirs; in this sense, it will be useful to remember that not only Othello

improves (apparently at least) his social condition by means of his wedding: Cassio hopes to regain his position through Desdemona's aid, and Iago uses Emilia (who has to betray her lady and friend) in his plan to destroy Othello and (in our reading) restore his lost honour. If the woman tries to resist this controlling of her activity, in which she is always her husband's "lieutenant", she will get into trouble. A refusal to obey the husband, and of the biggest kind, is, obviously, infidelity: Iago is afraid of the publicity of his suspicion: "twixt my sheets/He's done my office" (I,iii,381-2), and Othello destroys himself (after killing Desdemona) when he concludes that she has been unfaithful to him. Callaghan (1982) shares this belief in women's role as materializations of male discourse; they adapt to it in one way or other:

Desdemona is a 'tabula rasa' in a most curious sense. She is pure, white, and also blank; existing and not existing, and, since blank, open to any inscription, and therefore, in a sense, undecipherable. Othello's judgement of her as a whore is the inscription she must bear. She is no longer present or visible; all that remains is the stain emblazoned upon her honour. Condemned to silence, she is to 'be read' and not to speak herself. She has become Othello's text even if the reading of it is not a stable activity. (78)

In fact, one of the "problems" of this play is the apparent incapacity of Desdemona to speak for herself and of herself with clarity and authority, in a deep contrast with her previous speech before the senators. But Callaghan is absolutely right when she claims that Othello's wife and Brabantio's daughter have become the General's text, and the exact meaning of this shouldn't escape us: Othello won't let her explain what has happened, instead he will turn her into a text to be read and interpreted later; and, what is still worse, Othello will be writer and reader of his wife, finding in her just what he previously put on her: she is now but a space where gender relations are problematized and the obligations and consequences of the concept of honour are expanded. Othello is separated from his position as "king" in his marriage by virtue of his proclaimed inferiority as Other, his supposed failure as the keeper of his wife's sexuality, and the public exposure of this failure, especially unsufferable given his vulnerability.

It is of the greatest significance that woman goes through a very similar process in the so-called "dramas de honor" by Calderón, a process that is almost identical in *El médico de su honra*. In *El pintor de su deshonra*, Serafina doesn't have the opportunity of explaining what has happened: Juan Roca, her husband, gets at some conclusions based on what he sees and hears in a very specific moment, and lacking the necessary context (III,901b-903a). Juan Roca is a painter, and he projects this activity to interpret his wife's behaviour as if it were a painting or a play: he reads his culpability, in part at least, because the concept of honour forces him to take revenge without hesitation, and he prefers to sacrifice her than to face a life of dishonour. His role is clearly made identical to that of the onlooker, a "peeping Tom" who cannot reason and learn to discriminate what he sees. In *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza* Leonor, although partially guilty according to the standards of the age, has to suffer to be interpreted as a text too. The "proofs" that Lope de Almeida believes to have found are based on the commentaries of two men (Juan, II,435b and III,444ab, and the king, III,445b) who, in truth, don't know what is really happening. Leonor's reality is substituted by a new state of things created by Lope from what he understands of his friends' loose talk. This is produced, again, by Lope's anguish at being betrayed, at losing his honour, what somehow forces him to believe and complete what he is being told. But it is in *El médico de su honra* where we can find the best instance of this textualization of woman forced by the pressure

of honour: Gutierre Alfonso reads in Mencía her guilt. With extreme perversity, she is made to incriminate herself in the garden speech, where Gutierre approaches her impersonating the ‘Infante’ (II,336b-338a). The end of this play offers a magnificent example of this process we are commenting upon: the textualization is literal in Mencía, precisely when she mostly needs a discourse of her own; when she faces death she is denied even the possibility of stabilizing herself as an individual, and is consequently transformed, once again, into a piece of writing, subjected to a man’s interpretation. She will be, literally, read by Gutierre: the letter she is writing to the ‘Infante’, whose purpose and meaning is just the opposite of the one Gutierre grasps, accuses her; more still, she *is* that letter, helpless in the hands of her interpreter, her only link with the outside world, a man whose sense and perception are seriously altered by his hypertrophic sense of honour:

D. GUTIERRE [ap.] Escribiendo Mencía está; ya es fuerza ver lo que escribía.

QUÍTALE EL PAPEL.

D. MENCIA ¡Ay Dios! ¡Válgame el cielo!

ELLA SE DESMAYA.

D. GUTIERRE Estatua viva se quedó de hielo. LEE. “Vuestra alteza, señor... ¡Que por alteza vino mi honor a dar a tal bajeza! ...no se ausente...” Detente, voz; pues le ruega aquí que no se ausente, a tanto mal me ofrezco, que casi las desdichas me agradezco. (III,343b)

This is all that Gutierre needs: he doesn’t question his wife’s culpability, or feel the need to listen to her, to what she has to say in her defense. After she faints, she will be more clearly still a mere body, reified by a man, occupying a space. It will be attempted through this that she focuses no attention; this will have passed on from her to the text Gutierre is creating, although for the spectator she will conspicuously be there. But for Gutierre she has ceased to be an individual, with a subject position, someone to talk to and capable of explaining her own reality: significantly, she will receive a written death sentence, which she will not hear directly from her judge/executor; the textualization is, thus, completed.

Desdemona is manipulated by Othello who, as we have seen, inscribes in her his fears of infidelity and dishonour, motivated by his vulnerable position in the play as the ‘Other’, being so used to textualization himself. Nevertheless, it is Iago who first indulges in this activity, reproducing some of the most obnoxious, and at the same time best accepted, beliefs and attitudes, in relation to women, of the community that produced and received this play. Basically, Iago undertakes a complex task of substitution in which he destroys reality and replaces it by a fiction of his own creation, but connected with histories that are generally applied to women with an enormous success; as Iago himself puts it, his stories are “apt and of great credit”: they deal with the animality of blacks, the superiority of the whites, women’s innate lechery, Venetian ladies’ sophistication and deceitful nature etc... Iago’s cynicism, activating the most regressive aspects of the cultural constructions of the Venetian community, is accepted by other characters in their continuous activity of textual production: thus, Brabantio produces a new Othello before the senators, and a new light is shed on Desdemona and Cassio when reconstructed by Roderigo or Othello himself. As Cassio admits, “He -that is, Iago- speaks home” (II,i,162).

Obviously, it is Desdemona who suffers more by this activity. Iago’s action against her is a double one: firstly, he places her (in Othello’s imagination) in a context foreign to her; secondly, he turns all her actions against herself, manipulating words and concepts that he knows Othello is not good at handling. His first

objective is achieved by reminding Othello of the treacherous nature of Venetian women in general, and of Desdemona in particular; in fact, wasn't she who married with him, a nigger, against her father's consent, defying race, law and customs?; she, Iago reasons, has proved that can be "other than she seems". Thus, Desdemona's clearest proof of her love, and she as a subject, are inverted and turned into something very far from their reality, something that Desdemona (or anyone in her position, for that matter) cannot even suspect. Besides, the eroticism that Desdemona seems to embody is rewritten by Iago as a symbol of her sexual incontinence; for the Fathers of the Church, "omnis amator feruentior est adulter": even within marriage, excess is considered as an illicit activity. In fact Othello tries to convince the senators that he, in spite of his race, is far from this (I,iii,227-71; esp. 251-71). As a result, paradoxically, Othello is convinced of Desdemona's supposed lechery precisely by the experience that should prove to him her devoted love and chastity: her first night together. The villain will succeed when he is able to make Othello reinterpret Desdemona's passion and apply it to Cassio; Iago makes Brabantio actually "see" Desdemona have intercourse with Othello through the Ancient's ugly metaphors, and he achieves the same with Othello, speaking now of Desdemona and Cassio, as Edward Snow has pointed out (1980: 395). As it is impossible to see physically the guilty couple, Iago makes Othello transfer his own image to the place that, supposedly, Cassio occupies. In an impossible projection, Othello's intimacy with Desdemona is the absurd proof of her relation with Cassio: the onlooker takes the place of the image. Emilia and Bianca are equally thrown to the periphery by their men (Iago and Cassio), who use them to fulfill their plans or with purely sexual purposes. Emilia will be so close to Desdemona that she will also die at the hands of her husband, whom she has obeyed and misunderstood during the whole play. The difference with Porcia and Leonor, two heroines in *El pintor de su deshonra* and *El médico de su honra*, is interesting: Calderón portrays two women that do not limit their activity to quiet suffering, but decide to rule their own destiny. Leonor demands what she thinks she deserves to the king, and Porcia, in a position very similar to "the first" Desdemona, becomes "half the wooer" with the Prince of Ursino, 'betraying' her father and behaving in a similar way to what we are told that Desdemona did.

To conclude, the four plays that we have commented here present a process of elaboration of woman as a text created by and for man. Woman herself seems to be able to do little to escape this situation: although there are some instances of resistance to man's "scripting", the concept of woman appears so strongly ideologized by countless stories and conventions that it is almost impossible to escape this and, consequently, all these women will eventually be killed with the implicit acquiescence of the community. Thus, textualization, or the conversion of woman into a blank space where the legends of her discontinuities are written, is not the only perversion woman is subjected to: it becomes part of one and the same struggle for equality that so many different discourses try to fight back; as Catherine Belsey has written:<sup>9</sup>

The absolute right of one human being to require another's death in payment for an injury must be predicated on a radical inequality.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Callaghan, Dympna. 1989: *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy. A Study of 'King Lear', 'Othello', The Duchess of Malfi' and 'The White Devil'*. London, Harvester.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza, El médico de su honra* and *El pintor de su desbonra* have been taken from *Obras completas. Dramas*, edited by A. Valbuena Briones. 1991: Madrid, Aguilar. Quotations from *Othello* come from the New Penguin edition (1968).

<sup>3</sup> Montrose, Louis Adrian. 1986: "The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text." In Parker, Patricia, & David Quint, eds. 1986: *Literary Theory / Renaissance Texts*. Baltimore & London, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Snow, Edward A. 1980: "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*." In *English Literary Renaissance Autumn* : 384-412.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Henderson, working with C.G. Jung, has commented upon the fear of the woman to lose her identity in a strong patriarchal marriage. On the other hand, he considers the potential of marriage as a rite of passage for woman, during which man doubts about his new position:

Esencialmente, es un rito de iniciación de la mujer en el que el hombre puede sentirse cualquier cosa menos un héroe conquistador. No es sorprendente que encontremos, en las sociedades tribales, ritos compensadores del temor tales como el rapto o violación de la novia. Estos ritos capacitan al hombre para aferrarse a las reliquias de su papel heroico en el preciso momento en que tiene que someterse a su novia y asumir las responsabilidades del matrimonio. (Jung, C.G. 1984: *El hombre y sus símbolos*. Barcelona, Caralt. p. 133).

We disagree with the idea of man submitted by his wife, although we consider Henderson's comments on the doubts and fears produced by marriage of great interest.

<sup>6</sup> Neely, Carol Thomas. 1987: "Women and Men in Othello." In Bloom, Harold ed. 1987: *William Shakespeare's 'Othello'*. New York, Mod. Crit. Interp.

<sup>7</sup> Adamson, Jane. 1980: '*Othello*' as Tragedy: some problems of judgement and feeling. Cambridge, C.U.P. p. 220

<sup>8</sup> Sinfield, Alan. 1989: "Othello and the Politics of Character." In Barbeito, Manuel ed. 1989: *In Mortal Shakespeare (Radical Readings)*. Santiago, Univ. de Santiago.

These "woman positions" associated with the patriarchal concept of "female inconstancy" or "discontinuity" have to do with Jung's "four types of femininity" analysed in *La psicología de la transferencia*. 1982: Barcelona, Paidós.

<sup>9</sup> Belsey, Catherine. 1985: *The Subject of Tragedy*. London, Methuen. p.177.