

2020

Desdemona and Othello: An Adaptation

Asst. Prof. Dr. Rasha Abdulmunem Azeez
College of Languages/ University of Baghdad

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/midad>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Azeez, Asst. Prof. Dr. Rasha Abdulmunem (2020) "Desdemona and Othello: An Adaptation," *Midad AL-Adab Refereed Quarterly Journal*: Vol. 2020: Iss. 1, Article 77.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/midad/vol2020/iss1/77>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Arab Journals Platform. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Midad AL-Adab Refereed Quarterly Journal* by an authorized editor. The journal is hosted on [Digital Commons](#), an Elsevier platform. For more information, please contact rakan@aarj.edu.jo, marah@aarj.edu.jo, u.murad@aarj.edu.jo.

Desdemona and Othello: An Adaptation

Asst. Prof. Dr.
Rasha Abdulmunem Azeez
College of Languages/ University of Baghdad



(دزدیمونا) و (عطیل): اقتباس

أ.م.د. رشا عبد المنعم عزيز

كلية اللغات / جامعه بغداد

المخلص:

كتبت باولا فوكل مسرحيتها (دزديمونا) بعد 376 عام من نشر مسرحية (عطيل) للكاتب ويليام شكسبير مفترضة ان عطيل كان على حق في اتهامه لزوجته وان قصة اياغو عن خيانه دزديمونا هي قصة غير زانفة. سأل عطيل زوجته بعد زرع الغيرة فيه قائلا: "الست بزانية؟ الست بعاهرة؟" في تلك اللحظة تعاطف معظم بل كل القراء مع دزديمونا بشكل كبير لان ليس هناك من يشك ولو للحظة ان كلام عطيل صحيح وان دزديمونا زوجة غير وفيه. صورت الكاتبة فوكل دزديمونا العاهرة التي تخيلها عطيل وجعلتها بطلة مسرحيتها التي تحمل ذات الاسم. حيث صنعت فوكل من دزديمونا شخصية نسائية محبة للمغامرة وامرأة عادية تبحث عن الاثارة. اعادت فوكل كتابة مسرحية (عطيل) من وجهة نظر نسائية حيث كان التركيز ليس على شخصية الرجل بل شخصية المرأة. صنعت فوكل شخصية ثلاثية الابعاد معقدة ومريبة. وعليه يمكن القول ان فوكل اقتبست شخصية من المسرحية الاصل وطورتها لكتابة مسرحية عن شخصية دزديمونا مختلفة.

كلمات مفتاحية: اقتباس، خيانة، الشخصية النسائية، عاهرة، الاستقلالية

Abstract

Paula Vogel, after 376 years of the publication of Othello, writes her play Desdemona assuming that Othello is right in his accusation to his wife, and Iago's story about Desdemona's infidelity is not a false story. After his ear is poisoned with jealousy, Othello asks his wife Desdemona direct questions: "[a]re not you a strumpet? ... What, not a whore?" (4.2. 81, 84). At that moment, most of the readers, if not all, sympathize with Desdemona in a tremendous way. No one can believe or expect for a minute that Othello's speech is true and that Desdemona is not a faithful wife. Vogel depicts Desdemona as a whore, that Othello imagines her to be, as the new heroine of her play. Vogel characterizes a female figure who is an adventurer, an ordinary woman who is looking for excitement. Vogel rewrites William Shakespeare's Othello from a female perspective where the focus is not on a man but on a woman. Vogel creates a three-dimensional female character who is problematic and complicated. So stated, Vogel adapts a character from the original and develops her to write a play about a different Desdemona.

Key words: adaptation, infidelity, female character, whore, independency

Desdemona and Othello: An Adaptation

OTHELLO. I had been happy if the general camp/ Pioneers and all,
had tasted her sweet body,/ So I had nothing known.

William Shakespeare, Othello

Paula Vogel, after 376 years of the publication of Othello, writes her play Desdemona assuming that Othello is right in his accusation to his wife, and Iago's story about Desdemona's infidelity is not a false story. Vogel discerns that "[i]n the 1970s, when I had read Othello, I was struck by the fact that my main point of identification, of subjectivity, was a man who is supposedly cuckolded, that I was weeping for a man who is cuckolded rather than for Desdemona" (qtd. in Mansbridge, "Paula Vogel" 374). After his ear is poisoned with jealousy, Othello asks his wife Desdemona direct questions: "[a]re not you a strumpet? ... What, not a whore?" (4.2. 81, 84). At that moment, most of the readers, if not all, sympathize with Desdemona in a tremendous way. No one can believe or expect for a minute that Othello's speech is true and that Desdemona is not a faithful wife. Vogel depicts Desdemona as a whore, that Othello imagines her to be, as the new heroine of her play. Vogel characterizes a female figure who is an adventurer, an ordinary woman who is looking for excitement. Vogel "wants to portray women as more than functions of privatized family relationships as daughters, mothers, and wives" (Pellegrini 476). Vogel rewrites William

Shakespeare's Othello from a female perspective where the focus is not on a man but on a woman. Both Christopher Bigsby and Ann Pellegrini agree that Vogel creates a three-dimensional female character who is problematic and complicated (Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* 292; Pellegrini 476). So stated, Vogel adapts a character from the original and develops her to write a play about a different Desdemona.

An adapter of a character, according to Linda Seger, will read the material first, and after that he will ask the following questions: what is the problem that needs to be resolved? what does the character do to resolve the problem? what does happen to the adapted character in the original? how might this character be changed, influenced, and transformed? Then, most of the answers will lead the adapter to his story (80-81). Adapting a character, the adapter enables the readers to go inside that character and explore his struggles, dreams, fears, and desires; by exploring characters, the playwright is embodying a theme that he wants to highlight (Seger 36). The character of Shakespeare's Desdemona represents the story arc from which Vogel starts to write her play. Desdemona or the "material product of Othello and Iago's fantasy" (Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel* 34) becomes the main story line of the new play that suggests a different set of complications from Shakespeare's. The readers of Vogel's play, unlike the readers of Shakespeare's play, do not cry with pity for the honest, virtuous Desdemona or even blaming Othello

for listening to Iago. The readers of Desdemona are preoccupied with Vogel's treatment of women's problems, revealing their real needs.

For this purpose, Vogel makes a choice of what to remove, what to keep, and what to refocus. Desdemona is "a fast-paced collage of scenes" (Bigsby, Contemporary American Playwrights 299)¹ or fragments that employ certain events from the original, Othello. For instance, Vogel starts her play with the scene of the handkerchief and how Emilia steals the dropped handkerchief to please her husband Iago. Vogel wants to emphasize how this piece of linen that her heroine hates becomes the evidence of a wife's disloyalty and leads to her death. Another scene is Lodovico's² last visit to Cyprus in Act Five when he carries the news that Cassio is going to take charge and that Othello can go back to Venice. Vogel makes use of the same visit to further develop her plot and show that Desdemona speaks to Lodovico to help her escape from Cyprus with Emilia. An adapter needs to be selective to have a story line that serves his theme and ideas. In Seger's perspective, a "theme may be lost in order to make other themes clearer and more accessible," and being unfaithful to the original and making certain changes to highlight an idea "[take] a certain amount of courage from [the adapter]...if [adapters] are unwilling to make some changes in the source material, the transition from literature to drama won't happen" (9-10). Vogel

does not only appear courageous, but also she “turns conventions upside down and on their heads to see what falls out of their pockets” (Dolan 437).

What Othello’s readers may comprehend about female characters within the conventional frame of the play or of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries is that Desdemona is an honest wife who loves her husband truly, and she defends him even while dying after he strangles her; Emilia is a woman of piety who seeks to please her husband, although she admits that she would have an affair if the circumstances were in her favor; and Bianca is a whore that seeks money. Vogel “explicitly frames the angles from which we view each character in a series of what one critic called ‘character-freezing tableaux’, that at once eliminate a single viewpoint while drawing attention to the framing of characters on stage... freeing (or ‘alienating’) these characters from the audience’s familiar or conditioned responses” (Friedman 139). Thus, the readers will recognize that Desdemona suffers from problems of a stingy husband who does not realize her sexual adventures; Emilia has some social, prestigious ambition to be *fille de chambre* and wear nice dresses and jewelries; and Bianca wants to marry and be a housewife. This new assessment explains what Vogel says in an interview, “there’s no such thing as a ‘you’ or ‘he’ or a ‘she.’ They’re character recipes, not real people,” (Savran 279) and a writer can reshape them in the way that suits his assessment and his work’s context. Vogel

presents female characters in a different and a subjective way, specifically Desdemona, to provide the readers with new vision about the female world and make the readers reflect, recognize, and reach new judgments about this world (Mansbridge, Paula Vogel 34). While Vogel keeps the larger plot of Shakespeare as it is (Desdemona will possibly face the same fate and Emilia will not tell Othello about the fact of the missing handkerchief before he kills Desdemona), she changes the women's characters. This technique makes the readers wonder as they remember the plot line and the end of Shakespeare's Othello: are we going to weep for Desdemona now or Othello? could Desdemona be a cheater after all? should we change our feelings towards her now? how come that Desdemona will suffer the same end? Vogel challenges the myths and traditional views about women and their desires; she challenges readers' thoughts.

The readers will experience, as Sharon Friedman explains, a Brechtian alienation effect, which is a dramatic technique that is based on creating contradictions and making the familiar strange; the technique aims at provoking the readers to have a critical response and new discoveries about reality. Thus, according to, Friedman, the readers become alienated from their habitual perceptions of a character made strange by a shift in viewpoint. The Brechtian technique provides the means to examine ideologically determined beliefs and unconscious habitual perceptions. Friedman further

upholds that Vogel makes use of this technique to disrupt the readers' expectations of Othello or Desdemona, and to surprise the readers into thought (139). However, they may resist and experience negative empathy (Bigsby, *Modern American Drama* 412).

The readers will feel negative empathy towards Desdemona not as a victimized woman, but as “an impudent hussy” (Mansbridge, “Paula Vogel” 374). Vogel invites readers to identify with Desdemona whose stories or conversations do not move around Othello but around her sexuality as an adventure, her freedom, and her economic independence. Readers are seeing a prostitute in front of them that goes to Bianca’s brothel regularly, but they still might experience this negative empathy. They get this feeling because they see an unhappy wife who speaks about a penny-pinching husband: “[Othello] guards his purse strings much dearer than his wife” (Vogel 16); she is the unhappy wife whose death is doomed by her husband: “the social system... [is] forcing [women]... to depend on destructive men who exercise over them the power of life and death. [Women are denied] meaningful [and] remunerative employment” (Berney 253). Desdemona thinks highly about herself as a woman. She tells Emilia, “... you don’t have to care what anyone thinks about you—you’re a totally free woman, able to snap your fingers in any one’s face!” (Vogel 27). Desdemona believes in women’s freedom. That is why she describes her sexual practices with other men as trips around the

world. She seeks to be free and move beyond any boundary. She has this desire to know the world:

DESDEMONA. ... the men come into that pitch-black room—men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin—with rough skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me, Emilia—seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover darkness, taking them all into me; I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind—oh, how travel. (Vogel 20)

Desdemona, also, expresses her desperate life as a wife. When she first met Othello, she was fascinated by this strange man with a dark skin. She challenged her father and eloped with Othello, but she is disappointed later. She is sexually unhappy with Othello as well. Her feelings in the hoof-pick scene (scene 3) expose her complicated desires: “[o]h me, oh my—if I could find a man with just such a hoof-pick—he could pluck out my stone” (Vogel 9). Vogel allows Desdemona to express overtly her sexual needs away from the male centrality as Othello remains off-stage. Vogel employs a sexually aggressive and vulgar woman who resists, or tries to resist, her end that is scripted for her by both Othello and Shakespeare (Bigsby, *Modern American Drama 1945-2000* 412). It is as if Desdemona defies her victimization. While reading a story, readers always cheer for the hero and heroine, wanting the best and the happy ending for them. Readers hope and expend considerable

emotional energy wishing this hero or heroine success and to win at the end of the story (Seeger 5). Do readers have these feelings and emotions towards Vogel's Desdemona? Vogel wants the readers to change this viewpoint around female sexuality that is reductively organized around "the poles of idealized virgin/degraded whore" (Mansbridge, Paula Vogel 34).

Although a whore is degraded in any society, Vogel shows her reader how a whore is a hidden threat, as Joanna Mansbridge analyzes, in all women, a reminder of female sexual agency, and a source of profit (39). Ironically, Desdemona's sexuality is constructed by men (Iago and Othello). Ironically, also, all women in Othello (Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca) are called whores by Iago. Readers of Othello assume what Iago says about women is all not true because readers evaluate him as the evil, jealous, and paranoid character in the play; the irony is that the readers of Desdemona find Iago's statement a reality, particularly for Desdemona and Bianca. Actually, he thinks that all women are whores or cheaters: "... they do let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands./ Their best conscience/ Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown" (3.3.204-206). It is a tag that informs readers about the "garrison misogyny of the men" (Smith 66). Going back to how women's sexuality is defined by men or society, Vogel seems, in her adaptation of Othello, to give some insight to some lines or events that appear in the original. Among the important lines

uttered by Othello and related directly to Vogel's play are when he says, "I had been happy if the general camp,/ Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body/ So I had nothing known" (3.3.346-348). This statement appears to be a dramatic irony to the readers of Othello, but it appears as a reality in Desdemona. Yes, many men of the camp meet Desdemona in the dark room of Bianca's brothel on Tuesdays. To the surprise of Desdemona's readers, Desdemona might have slept with all the men in Cyprus except Cassio, who is the one that both Iago and Othello insist that he is Desdemona's lover. This ironic situation proves the limited thought of men in evaluating women's sexuality. Another situation that reflects men's or even society's misunderstanding or misevaluation of women's desires is when Desdemona leaves her father's house and elopes with Othello in Shakespeare's play: "BRABANTIO. Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:/ She has deceived her father and may thee," (1.3.288-289) and "IAGO. She did deceive her father, marrying you" (3.3.208). Desdemona's chastity does not save her in Othello, and it has been misunderstood. Vogel, in contrast, makes the misevaluation a reality. She further adjusts other scenes in Othello to highlight the body and sexuality of Desdemona. She was wooed from her father's house through words as she has been attracted to Othello's adventures. Emma Smith looks at this situation more deeply. Desdemona listens to Othello's stories with "a greedy ear/ Devour up my discourse"

(1.3.148-149). Smith finds that “[i]mages of appetite cast this dereliction of the normative domestic female role as a physical response; the open ear, imaged as a devouring mouth, functions as a synecdoche for her responsive body, seduced by exotic ... stories” (56). This same curious body is used by Desdemona in her sexual adventures. These same events and images used by Shakespeare are used to reshape Vogel’s Desdemona and implicate her sexuality the way Othello and Iago look at women’s sexuality. Consequently, Desdemona’s “feminism is not an identity, but rather a mode of inquiry, and [Vogel’s female] characters both enact and question the social, historical and theatrical conventions through which normative gender and sexuality establish their authority” (Mansbridge, “Paula Vogel” 387).

Another crux in configuring Desdemona’s sexuality is the handkerchief. Many readers, critics, and even Emilia consider the handkerchief a trifle, but in fact it turns to be the symbol of Desdemona’s chastity. It is related to an Egyptian parable that is told by Othello and how the loss of this handkerchief means a loss of a wife’s loyalty to her husband³. Thus, when the handkerchief is first given, “the anticipation of betrayal is already woven into the web of the gift.” It is just like a poison in Othello’s gift. It has a prophetic function (Berger Jr. 244). Shakespeare’s Desdemona fears the loss of the handkerchief, while Vogel’s Desdemona despises it. She describes it as “piss and vinegar!! ... the crappy little snot rag!” (Vogel 7).

Although Desdemona starts with the loss of the handkerchief, it does not mean that this napkin is very important to the plot of Vogel's play as it is to Shakespeare's. In Desdemona, the handkerchief becomes a symbol of "betrayal among women as they compete for the sexual attention of men" (Mansbridge, Paula Vogel 43). Reading Desdemona, one will disdain the napkin just like Desdemona. Vogel makes us see this napkin as a sign of envy and absence of solidarity among women. It is a race to please men. Bianca is ready to beat her partner Desdemona and to break their work bond because of this handkerchief. Emilia steals it because she seeks to please her man and let him get an advance in his career to gain more money. Emilia envies Desdemona's social status and she hates Desdemona's exploitation of her service. She recollects those days when Desdemona was a little girl and used to scatter toys and Emilia and other servants moved around to pick them up. She also remembers when Desdemona was only five years old and her father brought her a strand of pearls from the Indies and Desdemona simply plucked it from her neck, and how she "laughed to see us, Teresa, Maria and [Emilia], scabbling on all fours like dogs after truffles, scooping up the rollin' pearls" (Vogel 6). Vogel is acknowledging that the desires and sexuality of women are not so simple or limited to be measured by a small napkin with some small strawberries on it. It is as if Vogel says "let it be,"

and the prophecy of the handkerchief comes true; as a result, Vogel writes a shocking play.

Bigsby calls Desdemona a shocking proposition that transforms Desdemona from a decent, honest woman to a sexual predator (Contemporary American Playwrights 294). It is shocking because the audience meets a strange, unexpected Desdemona. Making things strange is the base of the concept of defamiliarization which Vogel has learned from the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984).⁴ This concept enables the writer to produce certain effects on the reader or audience (Pellegrini 477). Vogel cares for the effects that draw readers' attention to the complicated nature of women. That is why she defamiliarizes the stereotypes of female sexuality (Mansbridge, "Paula Vogel" 374). By defamiliarizing Desdemona, Vogel creates a playful, spoiled Venetian daughter (Simon 78). In other words, Vogel creates the other who is "full of whims and premonitions" (Vogel 16). Adaptation here then serves as a location for a meeting point with the other (O'Thomas 51). Vogel invokes, through adapting the character of Desdemona from Othello, the otherness of this character. The encounter with the other is not about mirroring, but it is rather about "calling into question of the Same... which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same... is brought about by the Other" (qtd. in O'Thomas 57). One can perceive in Bianca the image of Desdemona's other.

Desdemona praises (or perhaps envies) Bianca when Desdemona declares in front of Emilia, “[Bianca] is a free woman—a new woman, who can make her own living in the world” (Vogel 20). Friedman testifies that Desdemona sees Bianca as the “sexually and financially independent new woman of the Renaissance” (138). Desdemona wishes to be like Bianca who acts as Desdemona’s “‘imagined other woman’ who gives shape to ‘unacknowledgeable fantasies’” (Mansbridge 36). Vogel not only defamiliarizes Desdemona or creates the other, but also she makes use of an anti-realistic vision that, as Annette Saddik suggests, “distorts and moves past superficial appearance in order to access a truth beyond what ordinary experience tells us, and to [emphasize] connections, particularly among women, that are not readily apparent” (166). In addition to the concept of defamiliarization and creation of the other, Vogel resorts to the technique of metadrama to seclude this piece from Othello and to give us an interior look at this character (Seeger 20).

The use of metanarratives reveals a meaning of “no longer believing in, or being skeptical of, universal systems or truths” (Lane 202). The idea of metatheatre or metaplay has first appeared in Lionel Abel’s collection of essays *Metatheatre* that is published in 1963 (Pérez-Simón 3). Abel defines metatheatre as “a comparatively philosophic form of drama characterized by its self-conscious nature” (*Tragedy and Metatheatre* v). If we think of

Desdemona, we will find that it is a fragment from the original and interrupts the seamless, linear plot of it. This process of fragmentation and estrangement will break the illusion of reality, and will put the readers (who are not treated as simply outsiders) in a critical involvement; metadrama will create a form of literature that is a field of incessant mediation between drama and reality (Pérez-Simón 2; Wąchocka 184). Hence, illusion is the core of metadrama: “[i]n the metaplay there will always be a fantastic element. For in this kind of play fantasy is essential, it is what one finds at the heart of reality” (Abel, *Metatheatre* 79). That said, Vogel uses metadrama to imagine a scenario for the character of Desdemona. Vogel invents an illusion out of the reality of Othello, but it does not mean that the reality of Othello is ultimate. On the contrary, Vogel writes her play to question this reality. Abel contends that “[m]etatheatre glorifies the unwillingness of the imagination to regard any image of the world as ultimate” (*Metatheatre* 113). That is to say, there is a possibility that Desdemona is a prostitute. Even the end of Shakespeare’s play is questioned in Vogel’s adaptation: Desdemona asks Emilia to brush her hair before she goes to sleep in the night when Othello plans to smother Desdemona (Emilia says that she will do a hundred strokes); by the ninety-nine stroke of Emilia, the readers are not sure that Desdemona will face the same fate as Shakespeare’s Desdemona. Although many of the interpreters of Desdemona assume that the heroine will have the

same end as a fidelity to the original that considers Desdemona forever confined within Othello's control, this is not completely certain. Both Emilia and Desdemona freeze by the ninety-nine stroke, and the play ends. It is not evident whether the end will follow Shakespeare's reality or Vogel's illusion; Vogel's illusion can be more realistic than Shakespeare's reality. For Vogel, as Bigsby illustrates, "fantasy is a form of realism, simply displaced a little further along the spectrum" (Modern American Drama 1945-2000 412). Vogel's adaptation as a metaplay is not literally a fantasy or illusion, but it is rather an attempt to see the fundamental facts ignored by society. What Vogel does forcibly is directing readers' or society's attention to some female conflicts and male authority issues that might have been ignored when reading Othello. And this is the function of the metaplay: "metadrama... grabs us by the scruff of the neck and makes us look at them" (Hornby 180). To broaden the discussion of Vogel's purpose of adaptation, it is time to ask why Vogel adapts Shakespeare.

Marianne Novy gives a significant explanation of why Vogel or even other playwrights adapt Shakespeare, specifically his female characters.

Novy indicates that Shakespeare's plays incorporate [W]ell-known cultural myths about women's possibilities. [Adapters] use Shakespeare because his cultural authority means that the received notion of female characters in his plays matters more than the received notion of, say, Ben Jonson's Celia. At the same time, they [adapters] use Shakespeare because many of his female characters provide more material for interesting interpretations than of most other playwrights. (73)⁵

Novy emphasizes that Shakespeare's Othello is about a wife murder: why women are killed, and how to prevent this victimization of women. Novy considers that Vogel's adaptation is also about female victimization and the possibilities to avoid it and contends that Vogel's play (and even Shakespeare's) is concerned with the various cultural influences that contribute to women's victimization (74). Vogel raises important questions: whether Desdemona will survive her tragic end or not? can any woman survive a tragedy or victimization? It is a history of oppression to women, and Vogel is committed to redress a history of oppression (Savran 265). It is a history that might never cease till now. In Vogel's opinion, "[t]he ideologies that mislead [her] women are ideologies held, arguably, by many women today" (Novy 77). Questioning myths, Vogel, again here, is

connecting past with present and suggesting more forms that grant female characters or women in general more freedom.

So stated, the adaptation of Vogel is mostly about constructing a female image in her play. Friedman and Pellegrini perceive differently Vogel's female image in Desdemona. Friedman employs a positive image: "the shift... from discovering and creating positive images of women in the content of the drama to analyzing and disrupting the ideological codes embedded in the inherited structures of dramatic representation" (qtd. in 132). Pellegrini, on the other hand, embraces a kind of negative, not decisively positive image in Vogel's women. Pellegrini expresses that "Vogel's feminism is not about 'showing a positive image of women'... [h]er feminist vision is far more complicated—and messy—than that" (479). I argue that Vogel does not really mean to create a positive or negative image of women. I agree with Pellegrini that Vogel's image of women is complicated. A woman, certainly, can be as honest and chaste as Shakespeare's Desdemona, but Vogel shows what excessive male authority may create out of women, and how society marginalizes women in terms of their chances, values, and rights. Desdemona does not herself create her image of a bold, aggressive woman or a prostitute. It is the male characters who create this image or version of Desdemona out of suspicious,

imagination, and degradation. Emilia summarizes this when she tells Desdemona near the end of Othello:

EMILIA. What is it that [husbands] do

When they change us for others? Is it sport?

I think it is. And doth affection breed it?

I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?

It is so too. And have not we affections,

Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?

Then let them use us well; else let them know

The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.92-99)

It is Othello's and Iago's ills that instruct Desdemona to do ills. Eventually, it is men's education. It is men who teach Desdemona adultery. She says, "[w]hat does honesty have to do with adultery? Every honest man I know is an adulterer..." (Vogel 19).

Desdemona's complicated situation reminds me of Alice Arden's situation in *Arden of Faversham* (1592)⁶. Alice Arden finds her husband an absent husband, a penny-pinching man, and a merciless landlord. Alice murders him in favor of another man, Mosby. In Sean Benson's opinion, the adulteress of this play deserves our sympathy as much as our scorn (78). This reminds me of Desdemona and Vogel's negative empathy. Desdemona's situation resembles Alice's but the difference is that Desdemona is murdered

by her husband while the case with Alice is the opposite. Alice's murder reveals how women may react to husbands' ills. Benson connects the whole situation even to the modern wife: "... women should weep for [Alice Arden], not try to whitewash her... today in that situation there is ultimately divorce. For her there was no way out" (qtd. in 83). The final question that Benson ask after his analysis is "[w]ould a woman... viewing Othello distance herself from its spousal problems?" (83). If Shakespeare creates a warrior of Desdemona who asserts her innocence and never breaks faith with her husband till the end (Holmer 185), Vogel creates a warrior of Desdemona but in a different sense. Vogel creates a warrior who combats the critiques that evaluate Shakespeare's Desdemona as a passive woman. Desdemona is the warrior who tries to change her life and challenge her ill fate although she might fail at the end.

Notes

¹Desdemona contains thirty short scenes. Desdemona is sexually adventurous as she works for Cassio's harlot Bianca in her brothel. Desdemona is manipulative and voracious in her appetites. She is not loyal to her husband or to any man or woman (Friedman 131, 139).

² His name is written as "Ludovico" in Desdemona.

³ Harry Berger, Jr. refers to the parable of the handkerchief as a part of "the myth of African men's sexual excess. Othello makes the handkerchief symbolize first the wife's sexual power over her husband, and then the chastity that the husband demands as an always-inadequate placeholder for the virginity she lost when she subdued him to her love" (239).

⁴ "Shklovsky was significant to Vogel because he was interested, as was Vogel, in how art produces its effects on an audience. Although his particular focus was literature, his investigation into the techniques by which literary language can make ordinary events appear 'strange' had implications for other forms of art such as theater, as well as politics. His best-known concepts are 'defamiliarization' (ostranenie, or 'making strange') and 'lying bare' (in which art calls attention to its devices)" (Pellegrini 477).

⁵ "To Celia" is a poem first published in 1616 by Ben Jonson, who was a contemporary of Shakespeare. By 1770, the poem was set to music in the form of a song. The speaker of the song is expressing his great infatuation for Celia. He is idealizing her. Celia remains silent. The song says nothing significant about her character. Reading "To Celia," a reader may not feel that Celia has the depth and the complicated character of Shakespeare's female characters (Donaldson 74, 77).

⁶ Arden of Faversham is written and performed mostly in London in the 1590s. The author is anonymous. The events of the play took place during the 1550s. It is an example of an early domestic tragedy. Alice Arden kills her husband Thomas Arden. She hired two assassins. She and her lover Mosby also participate in attacking Arden. Finally, Alice and Mosby are sentenced to punishment (White xvii- xxix).

WORKS CITED

- Abel, Lionel. *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*. Hill and Wang, 1963.
- Berger Jr., Harry. "Impertinent Trifling: Desdemona's Handkerchief." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 47, no.3,1996, pp. 225-250.
- Berney, K. A., ed. *Contemporary Women Dramatists*. St James P, 1994.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. *Contemporary American Playwrights*. Cambridge UP, 1999.
- . *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Dolan, Jill. "Introduction to *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*." *Amazon All-Stars: Thirteen Lesbian Plays*, edited by Rosemary Keefe Curb, Applause, 1996, pp. 437-440.
- Donaldson, Ian, editor. *Ben Jonson*. Oxford U P, 1995.
- Friedman, Sharon. "Revisioning the Woman's Part: Paula Vogel's *Desdemona*." *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 15, no.2, 1999, pp. 131-141.
- Holmer, Joan Ozark. "Desdemona, Woman Warrior: 'O, these men, these men!' (4.3.59)." *William Shakespeare's Othello*, edited by Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010, pp. 185-218.
- Lane, Richard J., editor. *Global Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Routledge, 2013.
- Mansbridge, Joanna. *Paula Vogel*. The U of Michigan P, 2014.
- . "Paula Vogel." *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights*, edited by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, Christopher Innes, and Matthew C. Roudané, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 372-389.
- Novy, Marianne. "Saving *Desdemona* and/or Ourselves: Plays by Ann-Marie MacDonald and Paula Vogel." *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-*

- Visions in Literature and Performance, edited by Marianne Novy, Palgrave, 2000, pp. 67-83.
- O'Thomas, Mark. "Turning Japanese: Translation, Adaptation, and the Ethics of Trans-National Exchange." *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches*, edited by Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis R. Cutchins, Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 2010, pp.46-60.
- Pellegrini, Ann. "Repercussions and Reminders in the Plays of Paula Vogel: An Essay in Five Moments." *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, edited by David Krasner, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 473-485.
- Pérez-Simón, Andrés. "The Concept of Metatheatre: A Functional Approach." *Trans:Revue De Littérature Générale Et Comparée*, vol. 11, 2011, pp. 1-10.
- Savran, David. *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture*. Theatre Communications Group, 1999.
- Seeger, Linda. *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*. Henry Holt and Company, 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Ed. Julie Hankey. Cambridge U P, 2005.
- Simon, John. "Review of Desdemona, by Paula Vogel." *New York Magazine*, 22 November 1993, pp. 78-79.
- Smith, Emma. *William Shakespeare Othello*. Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2005.
- Vogel, Paula. *Desdemona*. Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1994.
- Wąchocka, Ewa. "Metatheatre: A Discourse On Contemporary Staging." *Directors & Designers*, edited by Christine White, Chicago U P, 2009, pp. 181-187.
- White, Martin, editor. Introduction. *The Tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham*. Norton, 1982, pp. xi-xxxi.