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"MY LIFE UPON HER FAITH": LOVE RELATIONSHIPS AND CUCKOLDRY IN *OTHELLO* AND *MUCH ADO*

BY ELIZABETH FALCONER '00

Love relationships and marriage during the Renaissance boasted very specific social roles for both males and females. Ideal Renaissance men and women were required to obey distinct codes of conduct; these codes, once translated into marriage treatises, pervaded marriages of the day (Vaughan 76). Females were expected to be silent, chaste, and obedient figures of society. This image carried over into female marriage roles, as wives were trusted to faithfully obey their husbands. Males were chiefly concerned with their honor and reputation in society; that is, a husband was expected to retain control of his wife. If he could not, and she was unfaithful to him, then he was deemed a cuckold. Renaissance men feared cuckoldry, for it labeled women as whores, men as victims, and was viewed as a mockery of male virility (Kahn 122). Shakespeare commented on this pervasive Renaissance male fear and its impact on marriage in several plays. The relationship between Othello and Desdemona in *Othello* and that between Claudio and Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* each illustrate male vulnerability to such a fear through Renaissance notions of female sexuality, as well as the ironic partnership of cuckoldry and the dependence of women's lives on the faith of their husbands.

According to Coppélia Kahn, cuckoldry was thought to be derived from three central attitudes toward Renaissance love relationships (121). Misogyny, the first of the beliefs, presumed that all women were licentious and wayward. The second belief was termed "double standard;" that is, infidelity was acceptable for men, but inexcusable for women. The final belief was called "patriarchal marriage." This basically involved male domination of marriage and female status as property. When a woman was unfaithful to her husband, the value of his property rapidly deteriorated. In such a situation, a role reversal took place, converting the man to victim and the woman to the center of the action. This woman would be the first to be blamed, not her lover. She would suffer condemnation, while her lover

would simply endure mere disapproval from the community. Strangely enough, cuckolds, the true victims of the events, were brought more humiliation than were either of the adulterers. This is due in part to Renaissance masculine ideals, which implied that a woman's fidelity is a symbol of her husband's virility (Kahn 121).

Cuckoldry was represented in literature through symbolic horns. These horns were both a phallic symbol and a representation of male virility. A woman leading her husband by the horns was symbolic of the man allowing his virility to be manipulated by his wife. Of course, according to Renaissance masculine identity, this idea was completely unacceptable, for it shifted the dominance from husband to wife. Men had three defenses against cuckoldry. The Renaissance man would either deny the existence of cuckoldry by objectifying women, expect female infidelity due to misogyny, or change the commonly outcast cuckold into a phallic symbol through horn imagery (Neely 141). These defenses allowed men to experience cuckoldry as a male bond, and to view marriage as a community of potential cuckolds.

In *Othello*, the plot revolves around the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. However, this marriage is one lacking in trust, as well as even personal intimacy, for Othello and Desdemona really know very little about each other. The relationship between the two is based solely on the tales Othello has shared with Desdemona: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them" (I.iii.167-8). The foundation of their marriage is composed totally of Othello's own life, which exhibits the self-centered qualities of Othello's love for Desdemona (Elliot 63). This lack of personal knowledge later manifests itself within the marriage as a lack of trust. According to Gerald Bentley, "romantic ignorance often paves the way for deception" (1019).

As Renaissance ideals, Othello and Desdemona both accept and reject established codes of conduct.

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Othello has been described as "ideally calm, reasonable, and rooted in a sense of legitimacy" (French 204). However, he rejects masculine ideals by wedding a much younger bride of a different social class (Vaughan 75). Renaissance men were supposed to be at most four to five years older than their wives. Othello is an alien in Venice, both racially and socially. He is completely unacquainted with Desdemona's world, and is highly vulnerable to Iago's deceit for that very reason. Othello can easily see the prejudice of Venice, but is blind to Desdemona's rejection of this prejudice. However unlike today, Renaissance society would not have sympathized with Othello's position in a racist society. Michael D. Bristol concludes that Othello and Desdemona's marriage would have been seen as "an absurdly mutual attraction between a beautiful woman and a funny monster" (4). As a soldier, Othello is successful and respected, however his knowledge outside of military situations is limited ("Othello" 1990). This lack of societal familiarity pervades his consciousness, allowing Iago to manipulate Othello's jealousy.

Desdemona rejects ideal feminine identity in her outspokenness. Betraying her father, Desdemona demonstrates her reluctance to submit to male authority (Vaughan 75). However once married, Desdemona surrenders to the typical submissive characteristics of the Renaissance wife. She is obedient as a wife and exhibits a transcendent love for her husband. This unconditional love is evident in her dying words: "Nobody; I myself...Commend me to my kind lord" (V.ii.125-6). In that statement, Desdemona is not submitting to Othello's physical ability to harm her, and not to his status as her husband, but to her true love for him (Calderwood 36). Even in her death, Desdemona does not blame her husband for the murder. This exhibits her steadfast love for the Moor.

Desdemona starts out as a perfect woman in Othello's feeling. When the couple defends their love to the court, Brabantio warns Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.iii.292-3). Though previously idealized in Othello's mind, Desdemona's image is tarnished even by the thought of Desdemona's possible deception (French 210). Nevertheless, Othello replies confidently, "My life upon her faith" (I.iii.294). In tragic irony, however, it will be Desdemona's life that depends on the faith of her

husband (Kastan 122).

To Othello, there are two types of women: "superhuman, totally virtuous" and "a dissembler, a deceiver, because of sexuality; she is thus subhuman, bestial, capable of any degradation" (French 211). Desdemona shifts from one image to the other, then back to "superhuman" again after her murder. Othello's growing jealousy results from this shift from "superhuman" to "subhuman" instigated by Iago. As an outsider in Desdemona's world, Othello is particularly vulnerable to Iago's influence. When presented with Iago's vulgar images of Desdemona's sexuality, Othello immediately mistrusts his wife. In contrast, Othello's trust in his Ancient never wavers. This betrayal of Desdemona in favor of Iago is due both to Iago's status as a venerable friend, and the fact that Othello does not even really know Desdemona. She is as unfamiliar to him as Venice is.

Strangely, however, Othello seems naive in his mistrust of his wife. Just as Othello knows Iago as an old friend, he should also know that Iago has a vulgar mind, and that he should not necessarily believe the lusty charges he brings against Desdemona. Further, Othello had previously staked his own life on his wife's fidelity, but when presented with Iago's ideas, he cannot even defend her from the obscene accusations (Gerard 13). Because of his rash nature, the Moor tends to act suddenly and powerfully in most situations, which may be due to his military background. When Othello trusts, that trust is unfailing. However, his instantaneous actions are based on Iago's unquestioned evil, and the truth is not understood by Othello until it is too late ("Othello: Selected Criticism" 1966a). Along with his rash nature, Othello's imagination plays a great role in his actions. He is able to imagine Desdemona's falsity, but not her innocence or Iago's dishonesty ("Othello: Selected Criticism" 1966a). The fact that his trust in Iago never sways, and that he assumes Desdemona's guilt points back to the pervasive male notion of misogyny. The existence of this idea in Othello's consciousness causes his actions to be rather impulsive. He is in a sense expecting Desdemona to be false, and when presented with the possibility, immediately accepts this idea as a truth.

Othello's fear of cuckoldry is unleashed as Iago's accusations continue. Iago, perhaps helping to bring this fear to the surface, calls cuckoldry: the green-eyed monster, which doth mock

The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger.
(III.iii.166-168)

From here, Othello begins to doubt that Desdemona could ever love him: "And yet, how nature erring from itself—" (III.iii.227). He later speaks of cuckoldry as if it is an unavoidable fate: 'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death. Even then this forked plague is fated to us When we do quicken. (III.iii.275-7)

Finally, Othello makes a reference to the symbolic horns of cuckoldry: "I have a pain upon my forehead, here" (III.iii.284). Othello's rage at the thought of being cuckolded builds until he reaches a kind of murderous hatred. He exclaims, "I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!" (IV.i.196).

Desdemona, however, holds onto her idealistic image of Othello. She states: "God me such usage send, / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend" (IV.iii.103-4). Desdemona feels that within a marriage, to hurt the other person in retaliation for what they have done to you is immoral, but to overlook this "right" to revenge is a form of charity, benefiting both yourself and your spouse (Adamson 239). A sharp contrast is visible between Othello's extreme rage and jealousy, and Desdemona's meek naiveté. She asks Emilia for confirmation "that there be women do abuse their husbands / In such gross kind?" (IV.iii.60-1). While Desdemona can hardly believe that such women exist, her husband is convinced of her guilt and is plotting his violent revenge.

The murder of Desdemona is a direct result of the nature of Othello and Desdemona's marriage, and Renaissance male fear of cuckoldry. The displaced trust from the relationship is missing due to the lack of intimate knowledge between Othello and Desdemona. Othello's threatened feelings stem from his fear of misogyny, as well as from his own lacking self-esteem in doubting Desdemona's love for him. The extremity of Othello's fear allows him to evolve into the jealous murderer that kills Desdemona.

Similar to Othello and Desdemona's marriage is the relationship between Claudio and Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. These two really lack any knowledge of each other. Claudio falls in love with Hero as an idealized, remote object (Neely 143). He refers to Hero as "the sweetest lady that ever I looked on" (I.i.166-7). However like Othello, Claudio is a brave soldier who is completely lacking in knowledge of

women. He has to have Don Pedro woo Hero for him instead of winning her for himself. Claudio's basic image of women stems from medieval notions of female excellence; namely that a chaste woman is a virtuous woman ("Much Ado About Nothing: Comment" 1966a). Also similar to Othello, Claudio is extremely vulnerable to warnings of cuckoldry from Benedick and Don John (Friedman 237). These warnings later increase Claudio's capability for believing Hero's infidelity.

Claudio is the conventional Renaissance man, and has been described along with Don Pedro as "stand[ing] on ceremony, rule, and right" (French 127). Claudio exhibits his masculine identity by inquiring about Hero's dowry. He asks whether or not Hero has a brother because it is proper Renaissance procedure to investigate such subjects (Bennett 275). Claudio is not a wealthy man, and marriage could often be a financial stepping-stone for Renaissance men (McEachern 275). In addition to this, Claudio shows his ideal masculine identity in his rejection of Hero in the church scene. He refuses her because of his image of her infidelity, and to marry her would stain his honor:

There, Leonato, take her back again.
Give not this rotten orange to your friend.
She's but the sign and semblance of her honor.
(IV.i.29-31)

Hero has lost her sexual purity here, and in Claudio's eyes, it follows that she has lost all of her other virtues, including her intellectual purity. She has become a "rotten orange." Anthony J. Lewis explains that "Claudio...sees only with his eyes, not with his reason" (58). The same could be said about Othello, as both men are convinced by visual proof. In order to preserve his social honor, Claudio can no longer marry the unchaste Hero. Therefore, he rejects her at the altar.

Claudio is also a very impulsive character, which leads to his refusal of Hero during the wedding scene. Earlier in the play during Don Pedro's wooing of Hero, Claudio was quick to believe that Don Pedro and Hero were both betraying him and that Don Pedro was wooing Hero for himself. This impulsive attitude carries into the church scene, during which Claudio denounces Hero publicly for her alleged infidelity. This episode correlates to Othello's instantaneous distrust of Desdemona. Both men have spontaneous and explosive natures. Finally, Claudio's

quick agreement to blindly marry Hero's cousin even "were she an Ethiop" bolsters this impulsiveness ("Much Ado About Nothing: Comment 1966a).

Just as Claudio is the ideal Renaissance man, Hero is the conventional Renaissance woman, yielding and submissive. "[Hero] is mostly a docile participant in an arranged marriage" ("Much Ado About Nothing" 1990). Hero is described by Carol Cook as "meek, self-effacing, vulnerable, obedient, seen and not heard, she is a face without a voice" (91). These qualities are apparent in Hero's silence. She never fully expresses her love for Claudio, and the one time she speaks of him endearingly is in a complement to Benedick: "He is the only man of Italy / Always excepted my dear Claudio" (III.i.92-3). Her silence, obedience, and modesty make Hero the ideal Renaissance wife (Neely 144). However, Hero's silence restricts her as a "non character." Carol Hansen comments that: "Indeed, the character of Hero is seen as puppet-like, popping up at the end like a doll who had been temporarily dismissed" (55).

Claudio possesses two images of Hero. The first is a nonsexual, not threatening, fraternal love. The second is a lustful beauty that deceives men. These two images may be associated with Othello's images of the "superhuman" and "subhuman" Desdemona. Like those of Othello, Claudio's perceptions of Hero change from nonsexual to lustful at the altar, and then back to nonsexual after her alleged death.

Claudio's anxiety, influenced by Benedick and Don John's warnings, is released at the altar scene. As Renaissance male code required male dominance, cuckoldry reversed this to make men the victims and women the active participants. Thus, cuckoldry was a direct violation of Renaissance male honor. Additionally, Hero was to be Claudio's property after the marriage, so he felt as though Hero had committed the ultimate betrayal (Hays 87). Therefore, his great show of emotion at the church scene is due to his male fear of cuckoldry.

Further, Claudio's belief of Don John's and Borachio's lies is much like Othello's acceptance of Iago's accusations. Both men were harboring notions of misogyny in their minds prior to the allegations brought against the women, and therefore both men reject the women. This rejection is never questioned by Claudio, even after Hero's death. He insists that he "sinned not but in mistaking" (V.i.261-2). Thus,

male influence persists despite Hero's death. Claudio's words at the tomb symbolize this male dominance and female silence (Cook 197).

With his final marriage at the play's conclusion, Claudio finally "enters the brotherhood of cuckolds" (Friedman 243). Old order is restored in new terms as Hero is unveiled to Claudio, finally purged of her unchaste accusations. These new terms consist of Claudio's recognition of Hero as a truly chaste, silent, and obedient woman.

The fear of cuckoldry was pervasive in Renaissance marriage, and was represented by Shakespeare in various manners. *Othello* illustrates this fear tragically through the death of the honest Desdemona, while *Much Ado About Nothing* portrays this fear in a comic manner. The fact that Hero does not actually die allows the cuckoldry theme to be communicated in a lighter way than that of *Othello*. These plays depicted cuckoldry in two different lights, but the consequences of even the threat of cuckoldry were equally severe in both cases. Perhaps the extremity of the male response in these situations could be attributed to the common notions of feminine ideology, misogyny, double standard, and patriarchal marriage. Males, aware that many women were lustful and deceitful, were apprehensive in their marriages. As wives were seen as property, these men would grow concerned about keeping their property under control. Consequently, male sensitivity was greatly heightened. Increased feelings of threat followed closely hereafter. The fear felt by these men is clearly illustrated in Othello's and Claudio's impulsive reactions to even slight implications of feminine infidelity.

This common Renaissance male fear was also easily derived from the nature of marriage at the time. Many marriages were based on money or were arranged, which allowed for a lack of trust and personal intimacy within relationships. When husband and wife hardly knew each other, there could be no solid foundation of trust in the relationship. This lacking trust between Othello and Desdemona ended tragically, while that between Claudio and Hero ended happily. However, putting Hero's alleged death into consideration, the lives of both these women were contingent on the faith of their husbands. An irony persists between cuckoldry and men's faith, for as cuckoldry hinged on a wife's sexual faithfulness to her husband, wives depended on their husbands re-

taining faith in them to be honest. Unfortunately, because of Renaissance marriage roles and the consequential lack of trust in many relationships, this faith

was often impossible to achieve, and males continued to fear cuckoldry and accept misogyny.

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