

REWRITING SHAKESPEARE

Desdemona and Othello

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Think aloud strategies

- What do I know about Othello and Desdemona?
- What does this picture suggest about their relationship?



Lullaby for Desdemona, Michael Chavel (1966-), surrealist, *Lullabies* (2004)

- How can I compare the two characters of Desdemona as they are presented in the following extracts?

From <i>Desdemona</i> , Toni Morrison (2012)	From <i>Othello</i> , Act I, Scene III (1606)
<p>DESDEMONA</p> <p>My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery. It means ill fated. It means doomed. Perhaps my parents believed or imagined or knew my fortune at the moment of my birth. Perhaps being born a girl gave them all they needed to know of what my life would be like. That it would be subject to the whims of my elders and the control of men. Certainly that was the standard, no, the obligation of females in Venice when I was a girl. Men made the rules; women followed them. A step away was doom, indeed, and misery without relief. My parents, keenly aware and approving of That system, could anticipate the future of a Child girl accurately.</p> <p>They were wrong. They knew the system, but they did not know me.</p> <p>I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose.</p>	<p>DESDEMONA</p> <p>My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty: To you I am bound for life and education, My life and education both do learn me How to respect you, you are lord of all my duty, I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband: And so much duty as my mother show'd To you, preferring you before her father, So much I challenge, that I may profess, Due to the Moor my lord.</p>

In the quiet, dark, emotional still-point of the night, Desdemona sings her famous “Willow Song”, recalling she was raised by an African maid with African stories and songs. “Barbary” is one of Shakespeare’s powerful and enigmatic “missing women – he did not write for her, but he imagined her. In Toni Morrison’s novel, Desdemona meets her.

DESDEMONA Barbary! Barbary. Come closer. How I have missed you. Remember the days we spent by the canal? We ate sweets and you saved the honey for me eating none yourself. We shared so much.

BARBARY We shared nothing.

DESDEMONA What do you mean?

SA’RAN I mean you don’t even know my name. Barbary? Barbary is what we call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage. Barbary? Barbary equals the sly, vicious enemy who must be put down at any price; held down at any cost for the conquerors’ pleasure. Barbary is the name of those without whom you could neither live nor prosper.

DESDEMONA So tell me. What is your name?

SA’RAN Sa’ran.

DESDEMONA Well, Sa’ran, whatever your name, you were my best friend.

SA’RAN I was your slave.

DESDEMONA What does that matter? I have known and loved you all my life.

SA’RAN I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned.

DESDEMONA So?

SA’RAN So you don’t know me. Have never known me.

DESDEMONA Because of your skin? It is you who lack knowing. Think. I wed a Moor. I fled my home to be with him. I defied my father, all my family to wed him. I joined him on the battlefield.

SA’RAN And he slaughtered you. Now do you know our difference?

SA'RAN

*The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow;*

Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee.

Sing willow, willow, willow.

*The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her
moans;*

Sing willow, willow, willow;

Her salt tears fell from her and soften'd the stones;

Sing willow, willow, willow-

Barbary in Shakespeare's *Othello*: Act IV, Scene III

After Othello has accused Desdemona of infidelity, calling her a “whore”, he orders Desdemona to go to bed to await him. Desdemona talks with Emilia, Iago's wife and her companion, of her love for Othello, of death and of Barbary, her mother's maid.

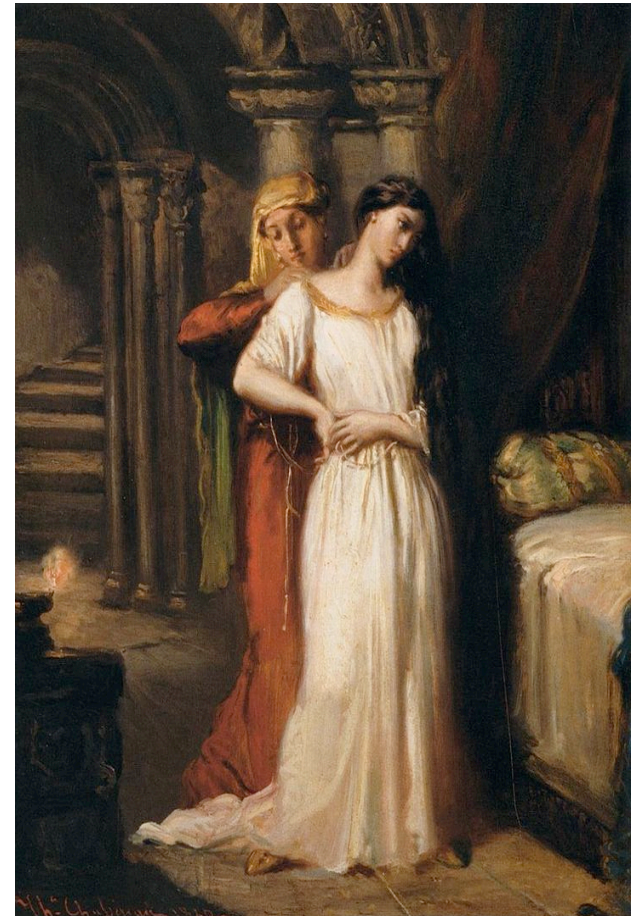
DESDEMONA My mother had a maid called Barbary:
She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad
And did forsake her; she had a song of “willow”,
An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune,
And she died singing it; that song tonight
Will not go from my mind... I have much to do,
But to go hang my head all at one side
And sing it like poor Barbary.
(...)

DESDEMONA (*Singing*)

*The poor soul sat sighing, by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow:
Her hand on her bosom her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow.
The fresh stream ran by her, and murmur'd her moans;
Sing willow, willow, willow;
Her salt tears fell from her, which soften'd the stones; -
Sing willow, willow, willow.*

Desdemona's Willow Song from *Othello*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RDAM14EPfs>



Desdemona retiring to her bed (1849),
Théodore Chassériau (1819-1856)

Context

Why Venice as a background of Desdemona and Othello's story?



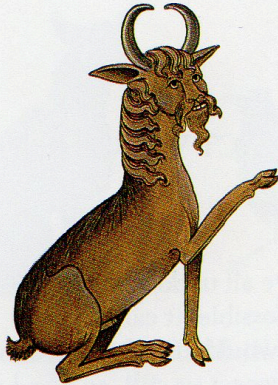
Venice as a cosmopolitan town, the market of the world, in continuous conflict with the Turks, and inhabited by Moors or “moretti”, whose presence is testified by sculptured heads on some Venetian palaces, as appears in this picture, expressing the suffering that so many Africans were subjected to in the service of Venice.

*OTHELLO – Haply
for I am black
And have not
those soft parts of
conversation
That chamberers
have.*

*[Othello, Act III,
Scene III]*

THE GOAT

OTHELLO



ACT III SCENE III

Othello:

Think'st thou, I'd make a life of jealousy,
To follow still the changes of the moon
With fresh suspicions? No: to be once in doubt,
Is once to be resolved. Exchange me for a goat,
When I shall turn the business of my soul
To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,
Matching thy inference. 'Tis not to make me jealous,
To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances;
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous:
Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear, or doubt of her revolt;
For she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago;
I'll see before I doubt: when I doubt, prove;
And, on the proof, there is no more but this,-
Away at once with love, or jealousy.

Further developments

1. "Exchange me for a goat":

What does the image of a goat suggest?

2. Act it out

Storytelling

Narrate Barbary's story in your own words
(1st person narration)

Sing willow

Explore ways of presenting the song
(Desdemona's mood) as to create a moving
dramatic effect. Try whispering or wailing
the words, making soft background noises,
imitating the sound of wind through
branches, or playing with ways of repeating
the refrain.

References

Desdemona, Toni Morrison, *Lyrics* by Rokia Traoré, Oberon Books, 2012.

Othello, William Shakespeare, 1603 (published, 1622).

Shakespeare's Animals, Pavilion Books, 1995 (the goat, p.38).

Shakespeare in Venice, Shaul Bassi, Alberto Toso Fei, Elzeviro, 2007.

Modern connections in Othello

<https://prezi.com/zqftblxi28cv/modern-day-connections-in-othello/>

Reviews

Desdemona review

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jul/20/desdemona-review>

Review- Toni Morrison's ghostly 'Desdemona' blends words and music in lyrical revision of Shakespeare

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-desdemona-cap-ucla-review-20151010-column.html>

