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Othello:

Homosocial Desire and its Conversion to Homosexual Desire

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INTRODUCTION

Act 2 Scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Othello* begins with an attempt to consummate a marriage. Othello and Desdemona have gone behind the back of Desdemona's father, Brabantio, and not only fallen in love, but married. Few are pleased at this, but the deed being done the time for them to truly be "as one" is upon them as Othello says to Desdemona, "Come, my dear love, / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensure: / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you" (Shakespeare 2.3.8-10). Brabantio is upset since both parties have betrayed him and he predicts a dark future for the marriage based on Desdemona's perceived tendency to deceive men. But the scene has another, unspoken yet tangible subtext: Othello's love and marriage also constitute a breach of the homosocial bonds that tie together the military world within the play.

To Iago, there can be nothing worse than having to be a witness to this act of betrayal of the homosocial bond. His plot to get Cassio drunk and instigate a fight with Montano is not only part of a plan to get Cassio demoted from his newly acquired position as Othello's lieutenant, it is also a way to frustrate and anger Othello by interrupting his coitus with Desdemona.

As the ruckus of the fight between Montano and Cassio reaches its crescendo, Othello rushes down to investigate the cause of the commotion. Without a hint of irony he asks all "Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that / Which Heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?" (Shakespeare 2.3.161-162). Of course, with Othello being one who was once a Muslim, a Turk, but has since become a Christian, the question is not without its layers. First, there is the barbaric aspect of being a Turk and how Cassio and Montano could lower themselves to act in such a way. Secondly, Othello asks this of them as one who was once a Turk, their enemy. They could easily

turn the question on him by asking Othello how a Turk, albeit a converted Turk, could have a marriage with Desdemona.

This scene is an encapsulation of what I will propose in this thesis. Iago's seemingly endless motives are nothing more than a ruse to mask the fact Othello has broken male homosocial bonds and must now pay for his perceived crime. Male homosocial desire is being disrupted and transforming into homosexual desire with the trope of turning Turk not only helping this occur, but is the catalyst of this transformation. In what follows, I will focus on how Othello's relationship with Desdemona is a cause for his conversion, or turning, back to Turk. I will also explore how his conversion also prompts other characters to "convert" as well. My argument links the play's erotic and religious concerns through what I perceive as an analogous transformation, a turn or conversion taking place in both.

My thesis builds on the theoretical work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, discusses the link between male homosocial desire and homosexual desire. While male homosocial desire can be viewed as what the modern day reader would describe as the desire for men to be around other men, albeit in a nonsexual way, or "male bonding", Sedgwick argues that this desire can transform in to male homosexual desire, but that in our society this is extremely problematic.

Sedgwick published her work in 1985, when LGBT issues were not a top priority for the United States government. AIDS was devastating the community and Ronald Reagan and Congress were doing nothing to fund research or, in the case of Reagan, never mention the word "AIDS". While some of her insights seem to be informed by this, the main crux of her argument

for the transference of desire is prophetic. In the last few years there has even been a term that is used to describe this transference: “Bromance”.

I do not want to cast a “bromance” shadow over *Othello* and the varying male relationships, but it is interesting to note that heterosexual males of the twenty-first century have found a way to own the “problematic” aspect of the male homosocial desire construct. The two root words being brother and romance illustrate just how correct Sedgwick is regards to this desire, but she is very exacting in her choice of using desire instead of love:

- i I have chosen to use the word “desire” rather than “love” to mark the erotic emphasis because, in literary critical and related discourse, “love” is more easily used to name a particular emotion, and desire to name a structure... (Sedgwick 2).

This distinction becomes very clear when you apply her theory to male homosocial relationships. It is because of the tricky nature of deeming a work “homosexual” that seems to be the guiding reasoning why she would need to make this distinction.

When discussing homosocial relationships between women, she does not see their relationships as being problematic in the same way as male relationship can be. Women can have homosocial relationships that may turn into homosexual affairs and they do not pose a threat whereas the same happening between men seems immediately threatening. She views these relationships as being a part of a “continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations (that) links lesbianism with the other forms of women’s attention to women” (Sedgwick 2). One of the questions for her is that if this continuum can be applied to women, then why not to men.

The obvious answer for this is male homophobia and all of the stereotypical trappings of what exactly it means to be a man. The world that Shakespeare creates in *Othello* for the male

characters is one that is militaristic and defined by being a soldier; to be a man is to be a soldier. Bruce R. Smith's analysis, in his book *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, is that Iago is such a part of this world that any infiltration by women into the brotherhood of these soldiers can be seen as a call to war.

In Iago's world men are separate from women in every way possible. Smith refers to Iago as a *soldier*, as one whose identity is formed and shaped by the military and its male homosocial relationships. This is all Iago knows and when he is confronted with not only Othello's marriage to Desdemona, but also the promotion of Cassio, who is also attached to a woman, "Iago's very identity is shaken" (Smith 63). The anger that Iago seemingly feeds off of in the play stems from this perceived betrayal and he begins to behave as an extremely jealous, scorned lover. The homosocial desire turns to homosexual desire and the militaristic lifestyle that Iago so adheres to is one of the causes for this conversion.

There is a certain homoeroticism that exists within the military that lends credence to Smith's words. Sedgwick's theory of the male homosocial relationships relates well to the military with its separation of men from women and forbidden rules of affection between heterosexual couples could easily lead to homosexual desire. The conversion to homosexual behavior even exists in the prison narrative. Here is another situation where men (and women) who are closely confined in a type of homosocial situation may invariably transfer their heterosexual desire to a homosexual one.

The sexual connotations of homosocial bonds in the military world of *Othello* have recently been explored in Toni Morrison's reimagining of *Othello* entitled *Desdemona*. It is a feminist take on the events of the play as Desdemona makes amends with Othello in heaven. The play is

essentially a two woman show with the actress playing Desdemona also providing the voices of the other characters and the second actress in the role of the Barbary nurse.

At one point during the play, Desdemona is recounting the stories that Othello told her to win her love. In Shakespeare's version, the exploits that Othello uses to seduce Desdemona are not spoken of in much detail. We know that he in essence "seduced" her with his stories and his way with language, but the specifics are left to the audience's imagination. Morrison takes this one step further and writes specific examples of just what type of stories he related to her to win her affection. Morrison's version is quite explicit and includes a story of a rape that Othello and Iago committed together. In the tale, Othello and Iago rape two mothers in tandem while each of their sons is forced to watch; becoming passive participants in the process. Desdemona is horrified by the tale, yet she is also overcome with sadness for Othello.

While the story is appalling, the image it conjures of Othello and Iago side by side as they rape these women while forcing the young boys to watch is the destructive side of when a male homosocial relationship has crossed in to homosexual desire. Morrison does not dwell on the homoerotic implications as it is merely used to illustrate not only Desdemona's ability to look past the horrors of war, but also the horrors that the man she is falling love with has committed. It is more telling that she was seduced by his militaristic stories than by acts of love.

Yet, in a Sedgwickian way the scene illustrates heterosexual desire and homosexual desire converging, albeit in an unsavory way. The women themselves are just the vessels for which Othello and Iago can engage in homosexual behavior. Having the young men watch just adds to the homoerotic nature of the rape. These two witnesses are forced to view not only the degradation of their mothers, but they are also cast as unwilling spectators to the only way that

these two men could show their desire for each other in a time when homosexuality was not a word.

In her book *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespeare Literature and Film*, Madhavi Menon examines the difficulties encountered when trying to apply Queer theory to Shakespeare. Menon's main argument is that the study of desire in history is essentially slanted toward, what she refers to as, heterohistory. Of course, on the other side is homohistory and each appear to have a hard time rectifying their difference. The major difficulty in trying to write about the history of "desire" is the concept that desire and identity must somehow be separated. "Homohistory argues for a turn away from an absolute sexual identity subtended by the reign of chrono-teleological difference" (4).

Menon subscribes to the notion that history is more about a "network of failures and successes (that) complicate any neat mapping of the world" (19). She argues that most historians are on the side of teleology and that heterohistoricism is based on a fixed point and all about pressing ahead. It is flawed because it does not take into account the setbacks of history like the burning of the library at Alexandria. Even the acceptance of homosexual desire amongst the Greeks and Romans and its demonization in later centuries, is a prime example of the fluidity of history; much like the notion that sexuality is just as fluid.

Most historians, according to Menon, misinterpret Foucault's intention in his "naming" of homosexuality in the mid 1800's. She cites Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who insisted Foucault drew "too sharp a contrast between earlier sexual categories and a ...homogenous...notion of homosexuality as we understand it today" (15). Most heterohistoricism pushes Queer history aside because it cannot fit into a "comfortable" box.

The burgeoning field of Queer history is fraught with difficulties due to exactly what Menon describes in the book. She believes that there is an inherent homophobia in historical study and that even looking at Shakespeare through the homo-prism, “one can never know much about sexuality at all” (5). Mainly, this is due to the fact that the homo version of Shakespeare is unknown to the general public. Even if both camps of historians claim Shakespeare as their own, as Menon argues, the sex is stripped away and only desire remains and a questionable desire at that. It is this need to separate every aspect of “sex” or even compartmentalize desire, sexuality, Queer or not Queer that makes the interpretation in a play like *Othello* particularly difficult.

This leads me to the trope of turning Turk. Being a Moor, Othello would have been perceived as originally Muslim and thus a Turk, a term that was often used interchangeably with Muslim. As a convert to Christianity, Othello is thus a recent convert from the religion of the enemies of Venice. This conversion is one way in which we can also view homosexual desire in a way that has not really been discussed before. Most scholars who have written on the subject use the notion of the feminization of men as a way to dance around the issue of homosexuality.

Daniel J. Vitkus discusses in *Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor*, that the Turk was used by authors of the time to play on the “anxieties about Ottoman aggression and links them to a larger network of moral, sexual and religious uncertainty (Vitkus 146). Other scholars such as Patricia Parker have also written about the correlation between turning Turk and its social implications. Yet, only Daniel Boyarin in his essay “Othello’s Penis: Or, Islam in the Closet” has made a correlation between the homosexual desire and the act of conversion. His view is that “Othello's occluded circumcision, hidden and denied, represents the Christian shame...” (Boyarin 261) that invariably feeds into the homosexual desire that is being denied with the play.

As Patricia Parker points out in her essay, "Preposterous Conversions: Turning Turk, and its "Pauline Rerighting", the notion that Turks were sexual beings and had harems of boys was fully in the minds of the audience that would be viewing this play. Even if Shakespeare is trying to upend stereotypes and prejudices, which I am not saying he is or is not as that is not the purpose of this thesis, the image of an "enemy" who is not only black, but also a converted Turk must have had a chilling effect on the audience. Within the play, he uses language to not only seduce Desdemona and Iago, but seemingly everyone he comes in contact with including the audience.

Even when Vitkus discusses the conversion as a sexual "turning" it is in heterodesirous terms:

The transformation of Othello, the "Moor of Venice," from a virtuous lover and Christian soldier to an enraged murderer may be read in the context of early modern conversion, or "turning," with particular attention to the sense of conversion as a sensual, sexual transgression. Othello's love and his faith in Desdemona are turned to hate because he believes, as he says to Emilia, that " [Desdemona] turned to folly, and she was a whore" (Shakespeare 5.2.133) (Vitkus 154).

I am not disputing the validity of this view, but what if we were to replace Desdemona with Iago; or better still replace Othello with Iago and Desdemona with Othello. Now, Iago's love and faith in Othello has turned, or converted, to hate because Othello has broken the homosocial bonds by falling in love with Desdemona.

The intensity of this bond crosses in to homosexual desire through numerous acts within the play that I will be discussing. There is the mock "marriage" between Othello and Iago and the sexual dream that Cassio performs on Iago to just name two examples. We may not think of sexual uncertainty as a trope within the play, but Othello just being a converted Turk raises

questions that there might be a component of sexual desire, whether heterosexual or homosexual, that is causing doubts amongst some of the characters.

Other doubts form when the homosocial bond is broken between Desdemona's father Brabantio and Othello. Of course, in much the same way that Iago is "disgusted" by the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, so too is Brabantio. His image of Othello as the converted Christian vanishes once he has married his daughter. He becomes nothing more than one of the Turks that they have been fighting against.

Their bond, being a homosocial one, is broken due to the intrusion of a woman. Not to play on homosexual stereotypes, but this construct that has been created by men, whether it be their friends or the army they fight with, cannot withstand the intrusion of women. In much the same way, the women of the play are akin to the invading Turks. They are outsiders who are trying to occupy the social space that men have kept between them. When one is allowed to infiltrate, not only are the bonds destroyed, but the lives of those around them are as well.

In part one, I will be discussing Iago and the homosocial relationships that have formed between him and the other males within the play and how these relationships inform his misogynistic view of homosocial relationships. I will be paying particular attention to his relationships with Othello and Cassio and how homosocial desire turns to homosexual desire in both instances through Rene Girard's theory of Triangular Desire and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Erotic Triangle.

In part two, I focus on Othello and the question of identity as it relates to his conversion from being Muslim to Christian and its effects on those around him, in particular Desdemona and Iago. I will also show how the view of the "lusty Turk" and the various other perceived negative

sexual stereotypes can easily facilitate the conversion of the homosocial relationships to homosexual relationships and how desire and its denial lead to the downfall of both Iago and Othello.

Part One:

Homosocial Relationships

In the little seen Canadian film *Paris, France*, a small publishing house is going to publish a novel by an ex-boxer. The author has come to visit the editors over Easter weekend and in one particular scene he begins to speak about the glaring that men use as a form of communication right before a boxing match; about how each man looks the other up and down to size him up for the fight. He makes a correlation between this action and how homosexual men “cruise” each other in the same way. This causes him to realize that sometimes when he’s on a bus and a man is looking him up and down he may not be looking for a fight, but actually looking to have sex.

You may wonder how this anecdote relates to *Othello*, but it is this duality of perception that is one of the driving forces behind Iago. The homosocial relationships that have been forged by the men within the play have been confused for something other than friendships. The homosexual desire between men that Sedgwick points out as instantly threatening to men is not really much of a problem for Iago, Cassio, or Othello who live in an earlier historical period and under a different system of sex/gender relationships. Even for Brabantio the disruption with the bond is linked to a division of desire and religious hatred. Because of Iago’s centrality to the play and to the homosocial universe of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in this section I am going to focus on his role within the male homosocial construct.

Iago is a monster. Or at least that seems to be the way he has been categorized since his debut upon the English stage in the early part of the seventeenth century. He is a character whom audiences for centuries have found perplexing; one man who could be consumed by so much hate for another ostensibly without a true motive. Actors have taken the role in varying directions ranging from a comic presence, which seemed to have varying success due to the heightened acting style that can accompany an over the top comic performance, to playing him as the villainous rogue he is most commonly associated with (Neill 77-78). He is a character

whose complexities seem to overshadow Othello and who Laurence Olivier thought “could always make the Moor look like a credulous idiot” (Neill 86).

In fact, it was Olivier who helped revive the notion that Iago should be played as a “homosexually motivated tempter” after Ian Bannen’s Iago from 1961 (Neill 85). Only three years after John Gielgud played the famous Moor, in blackface no less, Olivier, also in blackface, mounted a production that portrayed Frank Finlay’s Iago “as a man whose personality was deformed by his repressed homosexuality” (Neill 88). I argue that the majority of his motivations do come from repressed homosexual desire caused by his reliance on strong male homosocial bonds. The question remains whether or not Iago is conscience of his desire.

In regards to his motivations, Iago offers the audience quite a number of them: infidelity, racism, being passed up for promotion. All of these impetuses become superficial once you begin to understand the homosocial relationships that are crucial to the male characters within the work. The perceived invasion by a female and subsequent disintegration of the bond is what provides Iago with his true motivation.

As I discussed earlier, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s book argues that homosocial desire amongst both men and women can develop into homosexual desire though it is problematic when it occurs in male-male relationships. In *Othello*, this notion that homosociality as a continuous path to homosexual desire can be applied as an interpretive tool for my purposes. The homosocial relationships between the men in *Othello* are the strongest bonds that exist within the play. One would assume that being part of the military there is a sense of brotherhood that binds these men together. From Roman armies to the US Marines, the military has always seemed to pride itself as an organization where men are able to be MEN.

In his book, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*, Bruce R. Smith states the consequences for this in rather extreme terms:

Iago belongs to an all-male world in which women have no place. Iago defines himself totally in terms of that world, and when the newly married general passes over him and names as his lieutenant a man who is almost damned in a fair wife, Iago's very identity is shaken (Smith 63).

While I agree with Smith's point, I believe he is overstating the case. The world as Iago sees it is one that can include women; they can never encroach on the bond that men have created for themselves. They must live on the fringe of this male dominated world and are only needed as partners in procreation. Even Emilia, as Iago's long suffering wife, is not immune to this although she seems to understand her place within this world. Iago treats her as nothing more than a nuisance. Out of all the men in the play smitten with women, he is the only one who shows outward contempt for his "beloved". Thus she does not infringe on the male homosocial bond.

This bond these men have formed is not only in being soldiers, but in being men. Cassio, Roderigo and Othello have in their own ways broken this bond by not only falling in love with women, but giving themselves over to the women they love. Unlike Iago who keeps Emilia "in her place" so to speak, the others treat their women with an equality that infuriates Iago. He is determined that each one of them will have to pay for their crime against homosocial nature.

IAGO AND MISOGYNISTIC HOMOSOCIALITY

One of the more stereotypical views of male homosexual desire is the animosity they have toward women. Iago's misogynistic behavior would appear to be nothing more than one man's

insecurities about being a man. He is threatened by the intrusion of women within the homosocial construct that he has built not only his entire career around, but his life as well. The marriage of Othello to Desdemona is the catalyst by which Iago descends into the pit of revenge.

Iago is one who has left the use of women behind. There are numerous accounts of men “leaving the natural use of women” (Parker, Burton 9) in literature of the early seventeenth century. In his mind they are nothing more than vessels for sex for other men to enjoy or as tools to be used in his plans. Iago is wise enough to understand that while women can never break the male-male homosocial bond, they do need to be there for appearances. He thinks very little of his wife other than for the performance aspect of being in a marriage and the convenience of Emilia’s access to Desdemona.

There is not one instance in the play where Iago shows any affection toward Emilia. When he is given the handkerchief by her, he tells her that “...It is a common thing- / To have a foolish wife” (Shakespeare 3.3.305, 306); “a common thing” being a play on words for “a cunt available to anyone” (Wells, 300). This dreaded handkerchief that acts as a proto-McGuffin implicates Desdemona in a completely made-up affair with Cassio, thanks to Iago. Any last chance for Iago to show any appreciation to her is snuffed out.

To Iago, Cassio is another cause for the disruption of the homosocial bond between Othello and Iago. He is a man that Iago would love nothing more than to see dead. His hatred for Cassio stems from Cassio receiving the position of lieutenant above him, but Iago’s self-justified reasoning is based on inexperience and the fact that Cassio is soon to break the male homosocial bond. In fact, this is the first instance where we can see that Cassio, in Iago’s mind, is not

worthy of the male homosocial bond that the military affords. He is “a fellow almost damned in a fair wife” (Shakespeare 1.1.20).

Once the handkerchief is in the possession of Cassio, he tells Bianca to leave him as “I do attend here on the general, / And think it no addition nor my wish / To have him see me womaned” (Shakespeare 4.1.188-190). Even Cassio understands the value of the male homosocial bond and how its subversion by a female would appear to be problematic. Othello is “womaned” as well so there is a bond that each one of them shares that although disruptive to Iago’s worldview, does little to change theirs.

Iago as soldier against the Turkish army does not have much weight when held up against the notion that Iago is a soldier against the army of the opposite sex. His relationship with his wife resembles nothing more than having to deal with an insolent child that needs to be scolded. Women are inhuman or if they exhibit humanity it is in the service of stifling men. He views women as being duplicitous beings, which is ironic given that Iago could serve as the proto-duplicitous character. In Act 2 Scene 1 Iago is with Emilia and Desdemona after Cassio has visited to give word on Othello’s arrival. Cassio leaves to meet with the other soldiers and Othello, but Iago stays and begins his flippant characterization of women. It is as if he could be describing his own duplicitous nature:

“Come on, come on! You are pictures out of doors;

Bells in your parlours; wild-cats in your kitchens;

Saints in your injuries; devils being offended;

Players in your housewifery; and housewives

In your beds. (Shakespeare 2.1.109-113)”

He knows women are “devils” and that they are nothing more than surfaces to paint upon what they are not or noise where there should be quiet. Yet, Iago is describing exactly what he is as well. He is the “devil being offended” and as such as he demonizes and generalizes women as he is feminizing himself. The compartmentalization and categorization he has put them in adequately describes the personality of Iago. He is also one of the “bells”, “devils”, “saints”, “players” and “housewives” and none of these descriptors are meant to be complementary. Emilia recognizes the viciousness of Iago’s barbs when she proclaims “You shall not write my praise” (Shakespeare 2.1.116).

Unfortunately, for Othello it is not until the final moments of the play that he recognizes that Iago is a “devil”. When Iago is revealed as the villain to all, Othello tries to kill him since “If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee” (Shakespeare 5.2.285). Of course, Iago cannot be killed and Othello’s failed attempt to somehow hurt Iago proves further that he is “the devil” incarnate.

THE EROTIC SQUARE

Rene Girard’s literary theory of Triangular Desire and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Erotic Triangle, which she based on her study of homosocial desire within English Literature, also play an important role in understanding the relationships within *Othello*. The main characters within the play, Othello, Iago, Desdemona, and Cassio, all fit within the confines of both theories of triangulation. In Girard’s version, he proposes that in triangular desire “the nature of the object inspiring passion is not sufficient enough to account for the desire, one must turn to the

impassioned subject” (Girard 2). Mimetic desire also plays a part as well since if the so-called object that is inspiring passion is desired by the two separate individuals then invariably both of them will desire the same thing. Sedgwick’s Erotic Triangle adds a sexual or more erotic element to the triangulation and allows for homosexual desire to exist as well. Girard’s triangular desire does take in to account homosexual desire, but it is not an essential aspect:

t An attempt should be made to understand at least some forms of homosexuality from the standpoint of triangular desire. Proustian homosexuality, for example, can be defined as a gradual transferring to the mediator of an erotic value which in “normal” Don Juanism remains attached to the object itself. This gradual transfer is not, a priori, impossible; it is even likely... (Girard 47).

Sedgwick’s additional layer suggests that if we add in homosocial desire and homosexual desire, then we are left with an erotic triangle in where the object that is being desired, with a little bit of mimetic desire thrown in, will cause the desirers to desire each other. In *Othello*, this takes on a more complex role as I will argue that the triangle in this instance is more of a square with Cassio providing the fourth side. The four sides to this Erotic Square are Iago, Othello, Desdemona and Cassio. In much the same way that the Erotic Triangle works, there are various combinations that are not as straightforward as A + B wants C, so A wants B. The Erotic Square as it were differs from the erotic triangle not only in shape, but also in its ability to allow numerous combinations of desire.

The notion that Iago desiring Desdemona ultimately causes him to desire Othello would be an example of the Sedgwickian erotic triangle, but Iago does not desire Desdemona as much as he desires Othello. Although, there is a moment where Iago does mention that he loves her:

...Now I do love her too,

Not out of absolute lust (though peradventure

I stand accountant for as great a sin)

But partly led to diet my revenge, (Shakespeare 2.1.282-285)

Yet, this seems insincere. Iago even qualifies this so called “love” as merely something “to diet my revenge.” Even if the admission is nothing more than a show to add to the growing list of reasons why he hates Othello, it solidifies that there is indeed a triangle between the three principals. If we follow the Girardian example, than Othello’s desire for Desdemona causes his desire to be transferred to Iago and if Iago desires Cassio then his desire is transferred to Othello. Therefore, Desdemona’s desire for Othello actually does allow her to desire Cassio.

While all of these transfers of desire are taking place, the desire that starts out as homosocial slowly begins to convert to a more homosexual desire. Now, Sedgwick acknowledges that in the male-male homosocial relationship that homosexual desire can occur, although it may be problematic. Yet, there does not seem to be an issue in *Othello* when the once platonic bonds begin to turn slightly homoerotic. Homosexual desire begins to overtake the bond that is shared not only between Iago and Othello, but between Iago and Cassio as well.

The love that Iago has towards Othello can be viewed through the prism of an intense homosocial relationship, but his relationship to Othello becomes much more eroticized. The anger that fuels Iago’s plan, stemming from being passed up for a promotion, seems innocuous compared to the destruction that he unleashes. His reaction though is not merely for being

passed up for preferment by Othello, but being passed up by Othello's desire. This desire, in Iago's eyes, has now been transferred to Cassio.

Cassio has won the love and affection of Othello as he has been made lieutenant which earns him the hatred of Iago. Following the square, the affection that Othello shows to Cassio is in direct conflict with Iago's need to be Othello's right hand man. To fuel Othello's anger and poison his mind towards Cassio, he recounts an erotic dream that Cassio dreamt the prior night. Iago is lying in bed with him, although a common practice amongst men in the Renaissance, the sexual implications are still there, when Cassio begins to act out his dream:

In sleep I heard him say 'Sweet Desdemona,

Let us be wary, let us hide our loves';

And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,

Cry 'O sweet creature!', and then kiss me hard,

As if he plucked up kisses by the roots

That grew upon my lips, then laid his leg

Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed, and then

Cried 'Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!' (Shakespeare 3.3.420-427)

Iago initial intention is to poison Othello's mind in to thinking that Cassio is harboring an unrequited love for Desdemona. He mentions Cassio's need to "hide our loves", and the imagery verges on the erotic: the kissed lips and leg over his thigh. Yet, the subtext is clear that homosexual desire has entered Iago and Cassio's bed. In this instance, Iago transfers the alleged

desire that Cassio has for Desdemona onto himself. The mention of Desdemona is seemingly what lures Othello in, but the story is not just about Cassio and Iago.

The language that Shakespeare uses with “Let us be wary, let us hide our loves” (Shakespeare 3.3.421) is an allusion to a forbidden love that is far from heterosexual desire. If we apply the Erotic Square to Cassio’s supposed desire for Desdemona, she is also desired by Othello. So, if Iago desires Othello as he does Cassio in the homosocial construct, then through mimetic desire, Iago desires Cassio and vice versa. The homosexual desire that inhabits the dream is actually extremely erotic.

Robert Matz, in his essay “Slander, Renaissance Discourses of Sodomy, and Othello”, believes that the story is really Iago’s chance to win back the love of Othello and while this is true, the love verges on a sexual nature. Iago understands this, but he is too clever to truly let us know what is in his heart. Othello seems to be robotically drawn to the story through jealousy and titillation as it works on him on two separate levels.

On one level we have Cassio professing his forbidden heterosexual desire by acting it out through even more forbidden homosexual desire. If we discard the notion that Cassio is speaking about Desdemona, it puts this act of foreplay into a completely new perspective. Iago is in control as he tells the story since we do not have Cassio’s version, which we would assume to be a denial. In sharing this information with Othello, he can cast Cassio in a negative light and win back the affections of Othello.

On the other level, the story works to not only vilify Cassio, but Desdemona as well. Othello becomes enraged as he wants to “...tear her all to pieces” (Shakespeare 3.3.432), to destroy her. Iago has convinced him that she has broken the matrimonial bond through a tale of homosexual

desire. It is interesting to note that Iago has no issue with using a woman to further his quest for revenge. For Iago's plan of revenge to work he needs to have the assistance of women as props to enrage the men or titillate them. There seems to be no in-between in how these men, Roderigo or Othello, react to hearing about Desdemona.

Iago and Cassio's other occurrence of homosexual desire occurs when Iago has Othello eavesdrop on a conversation that is intended to confirm Othello's suspicion about Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Iago cleverly uses Bianca, once again a woman is used to further his needs, in a classic case of misdirection that sitcoms have been doing for decades. Cassio demonstrates Bianca's adoration as "she falls thus about my neck" (Shakespeare 4.1.131) by embracing Iago. It is similar to how Cassio embraced him as the two were lying in bed.

He continues further by mimicking her as she "so hangs, and lolls, and weeps upon me; so shakes, / and pulls me---ha, ha, ha!" (Shakespeare 4.1.134-135). His description sounds very similar to an orgasm and just they were in the erotic dream, he is locked in an embrace with Iago. Homosexual desire has crept in once again to disrupt the homosocial order. The affectionate nature of both these interactions is indicative of the how strongly Shakespeare upholds the bond that men form with one another. It cannot be overlooked that homosexual desire is playing a part in these displays of "friendliness".

In the prior scene with Othello, when Iago speaks of Cassio's dream, what follows is what Bruce Smith refers to as a "parody" of a wedding. Smith refuses to believe that this "marriage" is nothing more than a ceremony to reaffirm Iago's "self-definition as a man among men, as a soldier among soldiers" (Smith 63). If the Girardin square makes everyone on equal footing in relation to mimetic desire, then this homosocial marriage is based in some way on homosexual

desire. Its position following the homoerotic anecdote is almost a reversal of the heterosexual marriage rite that Othello and Desdemona have experienced. The Iago/Cassio dream story acts as a consummation of the Iago/Othello bond. Since these are two men then they have subverted the “normal” convention by having the sex first and following it up with the marriage vows.

The language that Othello use as he kneels, “In the due reverence of a sacred vow, / I hear engage my words” (Shakespeare 3.3.461-462), imparts a revered weight to the words. His use of “engage” or pledge is still in use today when a couple is in the period before marriage. There is even something slightly sexual as Othello kneels before Iago to pledge his vengeance.

Iago kneels next to Othello, or in whatever position the director deems suitable since Shakespeare was not keen on adding many stage directions. While Othello’s vow is more abstract and appeals to the ideal of revenge, which Iago certainly subscribes to and has fostered, Iago’s vow is directly to the Othello. His vow is much more personal as he pledges:

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. Let him command,

And to obey shall be in me remorse,

What bloody business ever (Shakespeare 3.3.463-469).

Iago pledges his entire self to Othello from his wit to his heart. As in wedding vows, he promises to obey and to do whatever it is that Othello asks. The visual of the two on their knees, each vowing their devotion to other another after the consummation of their desire through the simple act of language is powerful.

Although, the reader knows that Iago is manipulating Othello it does not matter for the moment. His goal of destroying Othello fades to the background, if even for a moment, as Iago has Othello in the bond that they shared before Cassio's promotion destroyed it. Whether he is ensnared in this bond makes no difference. They are now bonded by a sacred vow that, yes, Iago will break, but for the time being homosocial desire and homosexual desire have meshed.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE IN DESIRE

Language and its power to persuade and to obscure the truth is a theme that Shakespeare seems to connect with Iago as well. In the Cassio dream scene, Othello becomes enraged by imagining that Cassio is using Iago as a proxy for his wife. As I stated earlier, that rage comes more from a subconscious level of Cassio and Iago's playing out of homosexual desire. Even in the scene where Iago is setting up Cassio, Othello is watching and becoming angered / aroused by what he perceives to be Cassio speaking about his wife.

In the first, it is Iago's words against Cassio and in the second, though Cassio is speaking, it is still Iago's rhetorical misdirection that controls Othello. The use of rhetoric and who controls who through words also has male homosocial bonds attached to it as well. The beginning of the disintegration of this bond occurs when Iago uses words to deceive and control the men he is

surrounded with. Once Othello has stripped him of his power, Iago becomes intent on destroying all male bonds through language.

Othello won the love of Desdemona by his words, but his skills at rhetoric have been honed elsewhere. Iago is also a master of words and the two forge a relationship that sees them through many battles. What ultimately transpires is to some degree like a battle of suggestion between the two. None of the events that people are being accused of, infidelity mainly, actually occurs (except for Iago stealing Roderigo's jewels).

Iago's dialogue throughout the play is consistently working on multiple levels. He shares much with Othello in terms of hiding the "real" person that is lurking inside him, which I will discuss in part two. Iago has many reasons as to why he is seeking vengeance, but which are we to believe? In the first scene with Roderigo, he gives a truly honest characterization of himself:

In following him, I follow but myself---

Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,

But seeming so for my peculiar end;

For when my outward action doth demonstrate

The native act and figure of my heart

In compliment extern, 'tis not long after

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve

For daws to peck at: I am not what I am. (Shakespeare 1.1.58-65)

Iago hides behind the judgment of heaven as his rationale for the destruction of Othello. No one may pass judgment on him or his actions. The tone of these lines is at once defiant, but also melancholic. Iago is generally hurt by the superficial action of Cassio's promotion. There is a disconnect between his invocation of heaven and the utter devilishness of his scheme. This is clearly an example of the duality that is shared between Iago and Othello.

When Iago's "outward action doth demonstrate / the native act" (Shakespeare 1.1.61-62), he is not only going to play the part of Othello's friend, but he will even play the part of heterosexual desire as well. Heterosexual desire is the native act, the act that appears "normal", but Iago is keenly aware that the homosocial bonds he has formed have a subtext of homosexual desire. "I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at: I am not what I am" (Shakespeare 1.1.64). The fact he is not what he is, is quite clear to everyone except the characters in the play.

Iago is the gatekeeper to the homosocial bonds that are slowly dissolving around him. He is disgusted by the subversion of these bonds by the women who have found their way into the lives and hearts of the men that Iago bases his own worth on. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory that male homosocial bonds can be transformed to homosexual desire is at the heart of Iago's relationships with Othello and Cassio. It becomes problematic for Iago because he is unable to keep these bonds together.

The mock wedding, the erotic dream and the outwardly show of affection all compound to an intense homoerotic atmosphere that may or may not be subconsciously taking place amongst the other males. One thing is clear; Iago sees no other way to solve the problem than to destroy all that is around him.

Part Two:

Othello's Identity and Turning Turk

In the previous section I discussed Iago and the homosocial bond that is shared between him and Othello and how it has been fragmented by Othello's marriage to Desdemona. Iago's identity is one that feeds off the necessity of the homosocial bonds that he has formed as a soldier. As Othello's right hand man, he was secure in his position and stature and the homosocial bond was in balance. Once Othello forms a romantic connection with Desdemona and promotes Cassio to be his lieutenant, he moves to the position of an outsider who is pushed aside. This forms the Girardian Erotic Square with homosocial desire being transferred / shared as homosexual desire between the men through Desdemona.

Although, it may appear to be that these are actual triangulations, Desdemona is always a part of them. She is in some instances the active participant and other times the passive participant. In the first example, she is the obvious catalyst for the Iago's vengeance, though this is unbeknownst to her. She is a victim of circumstance more than anything else, simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. For Iago, she is just one of two reasons that Othello and Iago's homosocial bond has been broken.

As I will show in this chapter, Othello's identity would have the appearance to be a fixed point, since he begins the play as a converted Muslim and thus a Turk, a term that was often used interchangeably with Muslim. As he is taken in by Iago his "true" identity begins to overtake him. There will never be a true Christian conversion for Othello because he will always be a Muslim, a Turk and a Moor in the eyes of those around him. In fact, both Othello and Iago end up "turning" multiple times within the play. In the religious sense, Othello begins his life as a Turk who converts to Christianity and then back to a Turk when his passion overcomes him and he kills Desdemona. Iago is representative of the mistrustful Christian who is "turned" when he befriends Othello and allows the homosocial relationship that develops between them to turn to

homosexual desire. He is then “turned” once again when he betrays not only Othello, but also Cassio and Desdemona. In the end, the “Christian” has prevailed by destroying the outsider, the Turk.

Iago’s final conversion is one that sees him turn from the dutiful servant of Othello, to something akin to the devil. He shares this devilish conversion with Othello in much the same way that those in the play view Othello as a “Black Devil”. Even Iago will be recognized as a satanic figure because of his actions. While this should put the two on equal footing, Iago almost embraces his conversion to a villain whereas Othello can never truly recognize that he has become the evil that others around him have cast him as all along.

The complexity of each of the homosocial bonds have a direct effect on how each character in the play deals with their respective “problems”. Iago has no intent on strengthening the homosocial bond between him and Othello; he wants to destroy. He employs deception and manipulates Othello through language, but at the heart of it there is a lost past that Iago knows can never be regained. The importance of these bonds to Iago, and Othello’s subsequent disregard for them, is enough for him to cast Othello as a villain. Even though he has the ability to regain Othello’s love and his position as lieutenant, Iago is intent on revenge.

Iago’s vengeance even after winning over Othello can only be described as ruthlessness. He continues because his true motives are to destroy Othello. There is no going back for Othello in Iago’s eyes since he is and always will be tainted by the marriage between him and Desdemona. Iago is not simply satisfied by regaining his position because that was not the ultimate goal. He may in his monologues want the audience to believe this, but “...your words / and your performance are no kin together (Shakespeare 4.2.183-84)

In much the same way, Othello also becomes consumed by revenge. He easily falls for Iago's scheme of painting Desdemona as a whore and adulterer and forsakes his marriage for the homosocial bond. Whereas Iago's identity is determined by his allegiance to the militaristic lifestyle of male companionship, Othello seems to have found a way to live with the inclusion of women into the male homosocial life that the military provides. Othello is secure with his position and identity and does not see the problems that arise, as Iago does, when the homosocial bond between men is broken. For Othello, women can freely engage in the bonds that only men are allowed to share and his confidence in this is what ultimately causes conversions amongst his fellow men.

In fact, Othello's confidence can come across as arrogance. When he is brought before the Duke to answer Brabantio's complaint that he has "stolen" Desdemona, he does not fear for his life since "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly." (Shakespeare 1.2.31-32). His perception is that his military service, his entire being will acquit him from the accusations that Iago has instigated. Unfortunately, the one thing that can cause Brabantio to see through this "perfect soul" is the marrying of his daughter to a Moor. Even if Othello has converted to Christianity, he is nothing more than a wolf in sheep's clothing in the eyes of his accusers.

Othello is trapped in an identity crisis that began when he converts from a Muslim to a Christian. The play begins as Othello has begun, as a Moor. His identity is fixed in these first moments as nothing more than an abstract. Iago constantly refers to him as the "Moor" or "Moorship" or worse "Black Devil". This method of rendering Othello as an object rather than a fully realized person, establishes him as a type of blank slate: one that Othello has erased and used again to begin life as a Christian. It is not until he arrives to explain the subsequent

marriage to Desdemona do we fully see the conversion that he has undergone. Yet, this conversion is fraught with many problems. Aside from Othello's own conversion, he must explain the one that Desdemona undertook to become his wife.

THE DESDEMONA PROBLEM

Othello uses his power of language, much in the same way that Iago does, to seduce others around him. The object of his seduction that does not sit well with Brabantio is with his daughter, Desdemona. This unassuming act is seen as a spell that Othello has cast upon her. Brabantio believes that Desdemona's love for Othello is attributed to the fact that he "... enchanted her" (Shakespeare 1.2.63) "by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" (Shakespeare, 1.3.62). It is inconceivable to him that Othello would be able to woo Desdemona in any other way. Othello does cast a spell over her with his words as he wins her love by simply telling her stories about his childhood and the many battles he has fought.

Interestingly, Desdemona is not the only one who is changed by the words of Othello. Her own father has also fallen under the skillful use of rhetoric that Othello has employed:

Her father loved me, oft invited me,

Still questioned me the story of my life

From year to year: the battles, sieges, fortunes

That I have passed.

I ran it through, even from my boyish days

To th' very moment that he bade me tell it- (Shakespeare 1.3.128-133)

Yet, this type of seduction is not as problematic as the seduction of Desdemona. Othello winning over the senator is the same as a newly formed male homosocial bond. Brabantio formed a bond with Othello and now so has his daughter, but much like Iago's way of thinking, Brabantio views Desdemona's bond as illicit. The difference between the Othello / Iago and Othello / Brabantio bond is that it does not cross in to homosexual desire. It does however illustrate the importance of these male homosocial bonds.

I established that Othello is the "Other" based not only on his race, but his conversion from a Muslim to a Christian. He is a figure of power and respect, but only when he conforms to the societal norms. When he falls in love and marries Desdemona, the life that he has constructed for himself begins to crumble. Desdemona's father, Brabantio, is horrified and assumes he used witchcraft on her. Yet, Desdemona has made her own decision that causes a duality to form within her. She becomes an "Other" just as Othello has been his entire life.

When she is called before her father to defend her actions she acknowledges "a divided duty" (Shakespeare 1.3.180):

To you I am bound for life and education;

My life and education both do learn me

How to respect you: you are the lord of duty,

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord. (Shakespeare 1.3.181-188)

She is a divided woman, but she makes it clear that it is duty which is the prevailing law that she must follow. She appeals to his sense of honor by invoking “duty” not once, but three times.

The military based world in which she has become accustomed to, and which her newly married husband has devoted his life to, is the rhetoric she uses to navigate this world of homosocial desire.

Desdemona mentions her mother as being in a long line of women who have also had to come to terms with the male dominated world, but Desdemona is different. Her love for Othello has caused a conversion in her in much the same way that Othello converted to Christianity. The turning of Desdemona from disinterested to infatuation unwillingly thrusts her into the same situation as Othello. She has turned against “the natural” and is now converted to a perversion of “natural love”. Yet, “she loved me for the dangers I had passed, / and I loved her that she did pity them. / This is the only witchcraft I have used” (Shakespeare 1.3.167-69).

Interestingly, Othello makes himself seem to be much less of a persuasive orator when he reminds Brabantio and the Duke that he is “...rude as I am in my speech” (Shakespeare 1.3.82). Of course, Othello is not as “rude” as he portrays himself. From their viewpoints, he is once again using a type of spell to cast himself as the good upstanding Christian who is full of modesty. It is as if Othello were performing a type of role. As a converted Turk, there is an inherent performance that he is giving that allows him to obtain the love of Desdemona and even to earn the respect and adoration of the Venetian army.

Brabantio is fully aware he has come under the spell of Othello's words, so his surprise at Desdemona's affection toward Othello should actually come as no surprise at all. The transfer of desire is not only between Othello and Desdemona, but Brabantio as well. Using the triangulation of desire, Brabantio's disdain for Othello's marriage to his daughter masks a hidden desire that she has been able to possess Othello in a way that her father has only been able to on a strictly homosocial level, but now a type of conversion has occurred: the homosocial desire has become heterosocial.

The art of performance for Othello is a constant as Shakespeare positions him in these first moments as a thing; he is the obvious "Other". The otherness that defines him is not only present in the color of his skin; it is also in his renounced "mystical" religion as well. Othello, who has converted from Islam to Christianity, has seemingly overcome the repression, sexual or otherwise that has consumed Iago. His conversion from "the sexual freedom that is allowed in (this) life under Muslim law" (Vitkus 157) to the alleged purity of Christianity affords Othello a "perfect soul" (Shakespeare 1.2.30).

His conversion from a Muslim to a Christian is also mirrored in his conversion from a homosocial to a heterosocial desire. We do not know the full extent of the relationship that Iago and Othello had before the start of the play other than Iago's pronouncements of hatred and treachery. They were once very good friends and it would appear to be that way until Desdemona enters in to the picture. To Iago, desire must be an exclusive realm where men are allowed to flourish as men. Any interference with is akin to a declaration of war against homosocial bonds.

Interestingly, Othello and Desdemona's relationship and its subsequent acceptance by those around them is a pretty subversive act for Shakespeare. He has already given Othello a credible service record when it comes to war, but after all the conquests he has conquered the one thing that he should not be allowed to have: a white woman. Her conversion was begun and finished by Othello. As I previously mentioned, it was with his words that he seduced her; much in the same way that her own father was seduced by Othello. In the world of male homosocial bonds, this seduction of Desdemona is not acceptable. Brabantio and Iago both know this and although his skin color is partly the reason they disagree with the marriage, minus Iago's myriad of reasons, the use of rhetoric to seduce Desdemona is tantamount to turning ones back on the male homosocial world.

An element of Othello's conversion of Desdemona is to make her privy to the world of men. In a play with only three female characters, she is the only one who is allowed to be invited to join the male homosocial circle. Othello refers to her as "my fair warrior" (Shakespeare 2.1.177) which puts her on equal footing with the soldiers that he commands. He does not realize that he is sealing her fate by doing this since Iago is protective of the bonds that come along with being a soldier and will do what he must to conserve them.

The poisoning of Othello's mind by destroying the reputation of Desdemona is the obvious conclusion that Iago comes to if he is to preserve male homosocial bonds and desire. Like the Turks who are invading Cyprus, Desdemona is invading these bonds and trying to conquer the male dominated world she occupies. The only choice Iago is left with is to transform Desdemona in to an adulterer. He does not need to have her commit the actual act, just to plant a suggestion in Othello's mind. As much as he punishes Desdemona for what she represents to Iago, Othello also has to pay a price.

As Iago is slowly turning Othello back in to a Turk, he is also converting Desdemona as well since “a woman could turn Turk by acting like a whore” (Rice [153-54], Danson). Even using infidelity as the way to destroy her and Othello, with its root “infidel” meaning “a non-Christian”, implies an inherent godlessness. But Iago is not the first character to plant the seed of deception. It is actually Brabantio who warns Othello that “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (Shakespeare 1.1.291-291). Since Othello has also broken the male homosocial bond with Brabantio by marrying Desdemona, he seeks his own revenge as well.

While Iago allows her to still remain in the male homosocial world he leaves his dirty work to those who have allowed her to penetrate it: Othello and Cassio. Her friendship with Cassio goes against the thinking of seventeenth century males and their distance from females except for sexual needs. The mere fact that Cassio wants to use his friendship with Desdemona to get back in good graces with Othello is problematic. Interestingly, he does not see an issue with having Desdemona speak on his behalf, but being “womaned” with Bianca is different.

HOMOSEXUAL DESIRE IN “TURNING TURK”

Othello and Iago have switched roles at the beginning of the play. Iago has “turned Turk” by his behavior and we can assume his closeness to Othello. “An Englishman (or a fictional Italian) didn’t have to lose a foreskin to turn Turk; he only had to emulate any of his stereotypes” (Danson 9). These stereotypes could be treachery or being cruel; the two things Iago excels at within the play.

In the late 16th and early 17th century, there was an issue with Christian captives “turning Turk” so that they would be freed from their captures. These same people were looked upon as “a kind of unseen menace” (Vitkus 152) since they had double identities. This also applied to Turks who converted to Christianity as well. From this perspective, Othello would never fully be trusted as a true Christian. He is merely putting on an act, concealing his true nature from the rest of the world.

One of the many dualities that exist within the play is heterosexual desire versus homosexual desire within the context of “turning Turk” trope. Iago is the doing the same as he puts on as many faces as possible to appeal to all the male characters. His outward contempt for the female characters, illustrated by his taunting of Emilia and Desdemona in Act 2, Scene 1, is a manifestation of the broken male homosocial bond and his “turning Turk.” Iago has learned from Othello how to have a double identity; as he says, “I am not what I am” (Shakespeare 1.1.58-65).

There is a stereotypical idea that in homosexual desire there is a female and male role. It is apparent in Othello that this stereotype exists, but what is not apparent at times is who is playing whom. For example, in the marriage parody Othello does somewhat assume the role of the female. Although, it would appear that Iago is pledging his life more so than Othello, the switching of roles is clear. Iago has now gained all the power over Othello. Bruce Smith in his book, notes that the parody marriage is “all the more grotesque because Iago will use Othello’s trust to destroy him” (Smith 63).

An “eroticized bond” (Matz 266) has been formed between Othello and Iago that plays right in to the view of the time that the Turks were “seducers”. Patricia Parker speaks of the

“preposterous amor” that begins to become part of English writing around the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Protestants of the time viewed Turks as “preposterating’ the biblical testaments” (Parker 2), or reversing them. The idea of “preposterous amor” was also linked with sodomy. In turning Turk, Parker argues, one must go from the natural to that which is against nature.

The sexual interplay between the heterosexuals cannot mask the homosexual subtext that lurks within the play. Homosocial desire freely transforms to homosexual desire and the conscious actions of Othello are formed not only by what he sees and is being told, but also by his subconscious need to regain the homosocial bonds that are now lost. The eroticism that is shared between Iago and Othello occurs whenever the homosocial bond begins to turn into homosexual desire. It is here where their relationship becomes as close to the erotic as Shakespeare could get since subconsciously, Othello has seduced Iago.

On a male level within the confines of homosocial relationships, we already have seen an example of how Othello is able to seduce those that are around him. He had to seduce Brabantio to gain the position and stature. And he must have seduced the men, his soldiers, to follow someone who was once an enemy. His seduction of Iago has now turned into a betrayal in Iago’s eyes. Othello does not see that the seduction that he performed on Iago is now being turned back on him. This includes both scenes where Iago is mimicking Cassio’s erotic dream and where Othello watches as Iago entraps Cassio. What is striking in both these scenes is that Othello is the outsider literally (and figuratively) around the corner like a peeping tom.

The sexual nature of the Turk in the mind of Shakespeare’s audience was one of deviance and “buggery”. Although buggery is now a derogatory term for a homosexual, it initially “was a

corruption of a word for heresy” (Parker 9). Turkish pirates were known to partake in “the sexual use of men as women” (Parker 11) and sultans’ harems would be “full of such BOYES” (Grimeston, Parker 10). This idea of the ravaging boy rapist was so sensationalized to audiences.

Shakespeare’s casting Othello as the tragic hero of the play is just as sensationalized and subversive. If the audience already comes to the play with preconceived notions of a Moor as a boy rapist, how could they view Othello as a hero? They would need to see that Othello has been transformed by his conversion to Christianity and that there would be no issue with him sodomizing anyone within the play. Yet, there is still the notion that what if when he was a Turk he could have used men in a sexual nature. A type of suspicion follows his character throughout the play.

Even the foreskin, or lack thereof, instantly made one suspicious. Vitkus mentions in his essay “Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor” that in the seventeenth-century English mind, one of the requirements to convert to Islam was to be circumcised. This was akin to castration and a feminizing of the male. Following this logic a Muslim male would then have to “play the role” of the female. Of course, this would require some type of homosexual act since the belief was that all Muslims were lusty. The foreskin becomes a symbol of desire and sexuality in this way.

Since Othello began life as a Muslim, there is not a way to “de-circumcise” him as argued by Daniel Boyarin in his essay “Othello’s Penis: Or, Islam in the Closet”. Boyarin finds it interesting that the last words of Othello are that he wants to be remembered as one who “beat a Venetian and traduced the state / I took by the throat the circumcised dog / And smote him, thus” (Shakespeare 5.2.404-406). Othello wants to be remembered for the heroic acts of war he has

done as a Christian and not for the “Moorish” behavior that will ultimately define after he is found dead after murdering Desdemona. The need for him to emphasize the state of the penis of this obvious Turk that he has killed is the Muslim inside of him. The only way that the conversion can truly take place is when Othello is dead. It is sort of a castration in a sense that Othello must deny his own circumcised penis.

In *Othello*, castration can also be a stand-in for a man who has broken a homosocial bond by giving himself over to a female. Iago is disgusted by all the men who have been metaphorically castrated by the women within the play. Roderigo, Cassio, Othello are all male characters who are under the spell of love and each arouses the hatred and vengeance of Iago. Othello is one who has found true love and does not have some contempt for it like Cassio and his sometimes hostility towards Bianca.

Shakespeare has made Othello in to a surrogate Mohammad figure; he even suffers seizures not unlike the epilepsy that afflicted Mohammed. When Othello has the seizure, it is a physical manifestation of his transformation that is not the first but “...is his second fit; he had one yesterday” (Shakespeare 4.1.47). In a sermon given by Edward Kellet, from 1627, he explains Mohammed’s condition “as a divine punishment for lechery” (Vitkus 155). If we take into account the eavesdropping that precedes the seizure, Othello does appear to be a lecherous man hiding around the corner listening in on the sexual depravity that Cassio is apparently participating in with his wife.

This falls in line with the general acceptance at the time that Islam was nothing more than a perversion. Whether it be a sexual perversion or a religious one, to Shakespeare’s audience the Muslim would have appeared to be a predatory being that was always on the lookout for more

perversion. Othello's love and subsequent marriage is in itself, on the surface, the main perversion that propels the play along. Their love is "against all rules of nature" (Shakespeare 1.3.102) because it is not only interracial, but a between a Christian and a "turned" Muslim.

But there is no scene with the first seizure, and chances are there never was a previous seizure. Yet, Iago is speaking about the beginning of the transformation that occurred with the telling of the Cassio dream. For Iago, this was truly the beginning of destroying Othello from the inside. This seizure is akin to a "Dr. Jekyll / Mr. Hyde" type of transformation where the good natured personality is replaced by the more violent and base one. The first words he speaks to Iago after hearing Cassio's supposed "bragging" about Desdemona are "How shall I murder him, Iago" (Shakespeare 4.1.164). This is certainly not language from the figure of stoic greatness we were introduced to in the first scene.

Characters within the play are never true to who they are as every action is a performance, a show for the world to see. Iago and Othello, once homosocially bonded, have now grown apart. He has fallen in love with Desdemona and made Cassio his right hand man. Iago performs the role of the untrustworthy converter when he metaphorically converts to being a Turk. Othello in essence converts him just by his initial adoration of him and ultimate betrayal. Whether characters are performing in a role or acting out their basest desires, *Othello* begins to examine not only what it means to be a "Turk", but also can a Turk ever truly turn away from who he really is inside. Othello may start the play as a Christian, but before the end he reverts back to being a Turk and takes others with him.

CONCLUSION

I have chosen to use the word “desire” rather than “love” to mark the erotic emphasis because, in literary critical and related discourse, “love” is more easily used to name a particular emotion, and desire to name a structure... (Sedgwick 2).

Othello is a complex work that to this day still offers new perspectives on race, relationships, desire and even sexuality. Although, Shakespeare may not have had it in mind, his play forms the basis for a discussion about the lengths at which homosocial desire becomes homosexual desire and how this conversion is repeated in the conversion of Othello from Turk to Christian and back again.

Iago has been seen as the villainous instigator since the play was first performed in the early seventeenth century. He has been played by many actors as a rogue who, due to the heightened acting style of the times, must have come off as something akin to the moustache twirling villain tying Othello to the railroad tracks (Neill 77-78). Laurence Olivier helped revive the notion that Iago should be played as a “homosexually motivated tempter” when he mounted a production that portrayed Frank Finlay’s Iago “as a man whose personality was deformed by his repressed homosexuality” (Neill 85, 88).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, discusses the link between male homosocial desire and homosexual desire. While male homosocial desire can be viewed as what the modern day reader would describe as the desire for men to be around other men, albeit in a nonsexual way, or “male bonding”. Sedgwick argues that this desire can transform in to male homosexual desire, but that in our society this is extremely problematic.

Iago's homosocial desire has converted to homosexual desire in *Othello*. The homosocial bonds that the men within the play share have been corrupted by women, whether they are Desdemona or Emilia or even Bianca, the relationships between the men have changed. Iago has left the use of women behind and they are nothing more than vessels for sex for other men to enjoy or as tools to be used in his plans. Iago seemingly believes that while women can never break the male-male homosocial bond, they do need to be there for appearances and the performance of heterosexual desire.

This performance of not only the homosocial bonds, but the heterosexual bonds is essential to understanding Iago as a character. His view of women as being "a common thing" (Shakespeare 3.3.305) and really only there to be flippantly characterized as he does to Emilia and Desdemona when he tells them:

"Come on, come on! You are pictures out of doors;
Bells in your parlours; wild-cats in your kitchens;
Saints in your injuries; devils being offended;
Players in your housewifery; and housewives
In your beds. (Shakespeare 2.1.109-113)"

In other words, you are one thing and then another; exactly how Iago is to everyone that he comes in contact with in the play

With Rene Girard's literary theory of Triangular Desire being "the nature of the object inspiring passion is not sufficient enough to account for the desire, one must turn to the impassioned subject" (Girard 2) and Eve Sedgwick's Erotic Triangle, which adds sexual desire to

the mix, as our guide we can view *Othello* through the prism of homosexual desire and not just homosocial. Mimetic desire also plays a part in that the erotic triangle is ultimately the byproduct of this desire and, in the case of the play, can become a type of square.

In *Othello*, the triangle is more of a square with Cassio providing the fourth side. We can look at the four sides of this Erotic Square as Iago, Othello, Desdemona and Cassio. In much the same way that the Erotic Triangle works, there are various combinations that are not as straightforward as A + B wants C, so A wants B. The Erotic Square as it were differs from the erotic triangle not only in shape, but also in its ability to allow numerous combinations of desire.

The “wedding ceremony” between Iago and Othello and the Iago/Cassio dream are both examples of where this square displays itself. Although Bruce Smith felt the wedding was more of a “parody”, the language that Othello use as he kneels, “In the due reverence of a sacred vow, / I hear engage my words” (Shakespeare 3.3.461-462), imparts a revered weight to the words. This heterosexual ceremony has converted to a homosocial one and because of mimetic desire is now based in homosexual desire.

The consummation of their desire is actually before the ceremony when Iago relates the erotic dream that Cassio has reenacted in their sleep. It connects not only Iago and Othello, but also Cassio and Desdemona, and not because Cassio is apparently dreaming of her, but through the erotic square. Iago has knowingly planted the seed in Othello’s mind that Cassio at the very least desires Desdemona. Iago’s use of sexual imagery when he relates the dream to Othello verges on the titillating. Of course, this is exactly the expected outcome that Iago was intending.

Iago wants Othello to turn Turk. He desires Othello and the only way that he can obtain him is to allow him to convert back to be a Turk. For Iago, if the stereotype of the Turk is true,

then it would fulfill the homosexual desire that now holds their bond together. Yet, the play's destructive nature towards those who do not convert is glaringly obvious in Iago's eyes. The conversion of homosocial desire to homosexual desire that Iago feels toward Othello is also an element in this notion of "turning Turk". *Othello* examines what it means to be a "Turk" and also, can a Turk ever truly turn away from who they are. Othello may start the play as a Christian, but before the end he reverts back to being a Turk.

As Othello converted, he also converted Brabantio. Through Othello's stories of his life and his triumphs in war, he seduces him into seeing not a Turk, but Othello. Ironically, he has done the same to Desdemona, but with a very different outcome. Interestingly, Brabantio accuses Othello of witchcraft as a way for Othello to have won her love. He must have "...enchanted her" (Shakespeare 1.2.63) "by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" (Shakespeare, 1.3.62).

Unfortunately, Desdemona is caught up in this with her father on one side and Iago on the other. She has turned away from "natural love" and must find a way to save not only herself, but Othello as well. She is a divided woman, but she makes it clear that it is duty which is the prevailing law that she must follow. She appeals to her father's sense of honor by invoking "duty". The military based world in which she has become accustomed to, and which her newly married husband has devoted his life to, is the language she uses to navigate this world of homosocial desire.

These conversions allow for multiple layers of subtext to be gleaned from the play. The conversion of Othello to Christianity may seem of little consequence to modern readers, but in the context of the play it is just an example of how a type of desire can be changed. Othello

begins the play as an almost arrogant man who is brought before the Duke to answer Brabantio's complaint that he has "stolen" Desdemona, he does not fear for his life since "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly." (Shakespeare 1.2.31-32).

The Turk in the minds of Shakespeare's audience was a deviant and sexual being. Even Turkish pirates were known to partake in "the sexual use of men as women" (Parker 11) and sultans' harems would be "full of such BOYES" (Grimeston, Parker 10). Even the lack of foreskin was also another characteristic of Muslims that made one instantly suspicious. Daniel J. Vitkus' essay "Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor" mentions that in the seventeenth-century English mind, circumcision was akin to castration and feminization. And since one of the requirements of Islam was to be circumcised, this made Othello, the character, immediately suspicious. For Shakespeare to place Othello as the tragic hero is an act of subversion that even today seems admirable.

In conclusion, the homosocial desire that defines Iago's world is not held as dearly to the other men within the play. His adherence to a military life with its rules and closeness between men has come under attack. With Othello's marriage and love for Desdemona and Cassio's relationship with Bianca as just two examples of the perceived erosion of the male homosocial bonds, Iago's world is crumbling. The homosocial desire that he feels has converted to homosexual desire due to his misogynist view of women and the male dominated world of the military. Through the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her theory of homosocial desire, we can see how troubled Iago is by this conversion and the problems that it brings up for him. Although, his reaction is to seek revenge on Othello, it is perfectly logical to make the connection that he feels betrayed by Othello and wants to convert him back to a stereotypical violent, sexual Turk.

The conversion in Iago is also mirrored in the conversion of Othello from Muslim to Christian and back again. Othello also causes “conversions” in others around him such as Brabantio and Desdemona. All those who are around Othello become seduced by his stories of heroics and seemingly forget that he ever was their enemy. It is only when Othello breaks the homosocial bonds that his performance begins to fade and he becomes a cracked actor. Those that fall in love with Othello are doomed since although he is a tragic hero he is ultimately a Moor who will never be a true Christian.

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