A Guiltless Death: The Unconsummated Marriage in *Othello*

Although Desdemona and Othello are truly in love when they marry, they are unable to consummate their marriage in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Because their marriage was tragically short (only three days), there were few opportunities for them to be together alone. When the opportunity did present itself, unforeseen circumstances arose and the moment was lost. This being the case, in murdering Desdemona, Othello kills a virginal wife -- a deeper irony considering that he murders her because he believes her to be unchaste.

Desdemona is faithful before and during her marriage to Othello. Her own words defend the fact that she is an "honest" wife. After Othello accuses her for the first time of being a whore, Desdemona responds to Iago's queries of why Othello would thus accuse her with "I do not know. I am sure I am none such" (4.2.130). She continues to defend her virtue up to the moment of her death when she says "A guiltless death I die" (5.2.126).

While Desdemona's words alone may not be enough proof of her faithfulness to Othello, her attendant, Emilia, also denies Othello's accusations of Desdemona. When Othello's questions Emilia about Desdemona's honesty, she replies "For if she be not honest, chaste, and true,/There's no man happy; the purest of their wives/Is foul as slander" (4.2.18-20). As Desdemona's longtime servant, she is more aware than anyone
else of her mistress' actions and whereabouts. If she knows Desdemona to be chaste, then she indeed is. She defends Desdemona in private moments, and even proclaims to Othello his wife's innocence as she herself dies, "Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor" (5.2.258).

In order to say Desdemona died a virgin, we must prove that she and Othello were unable to consummate their marriage. For the purposes of argument, we will assume that Desdemona enters the marriage a virgin.

The first opportunity that Desdemona and Othello have to consummate their marriage is their wedding night. Cassio and certain officers of the Venetian court ruin this chance when they come to Othello's lodgings to inform him that the Duke requires his presence in council immediately. While they may have had time to consummate their marriage before Cassio arrived, Othello's own words to the Duke and Senators are proof that nothing has happened yet, "It is most true; true, I have married her./The very head and front of my offending/ Hath this extent, no more" (1.3.81-83). He informs the court that he has done nothing more than marry Desdemona up to this point.

After learning he has to leave for Cyprus that evening, he asks the court to let his new wife join him. To assure them that she will not distract him from his duties, Othello says, "Vouch with me, heaven, I therefor beg it not/To please the palate of my appetite,/Nor to comply with heat-the young affects/In me defunct-and proper satisfaction,/But to be free and bounteous to her mind" (1.3.262-266). In saying this, he means his marriage is not one of passion but of companionship. Therefore, consummating their marriage is not of the utmost importance to Othello and unlike the "appetites" of younger men, sex will not be a major objective while he is in Cyprus.
Desdemona and Othello have but a brief time together before he leaves for Cyprus. While they technically could use this time to consummate their marriage, it is highly unlikely that they take advantage of this opportunity. The amount of time Othello has to prepare for his trip is short. "Come Desdemona. I have but an hour/ Of love, of worldly matters and direction,/To spend with thee. We must obey the time" (1.3.299-301), are Othello's words as they prepare to return home. They must discuss his trip, pack, organize his "worldly affairs," and say good-bye within an hour. With a schedule such as this, there is not much time left to consummate a marriage. Further proof lies in the fact that Othello has admitted to the Court that he is not a man of sexual passions. It is not logical to think that he would rush home and quickly make love to his virgin bride when he has to immediately leave to wage war.

Their first night together in Cyprus is the next opportunity they have to consummate their marriage. Before they retire for the evening, we learn that in fact Othello and Desdemona have not yet made love when Othello says to Desdemona, "Come, my dear love,/The purchases made, the fruits are to ensue;/That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.-" (2.3.8-10). The "purchase" is their marriage contract, but the "profit" has yet to be paid. However, unforeseen circumstances prevent them yet again. To prove this, we should reexamine the events that follow their departure to bed.

Immediately after they leave, Iago and Cassio have a conversation that would occupy no more than three or four minutes of time, barely enough for Othello and Desdemona to get to their sleeping quarters. After Cassio leaves, Iago sets a plan in motion to get Cassio and Montano to fight. This would have taken no more than fifteen
minutes -- not much time for a lady to get ready for her "first time," especially considering the layers of clothing that women of the Renaissance period wore (many had their maidservants sew them into their clothing). During the fight, Iago sends Roderigo to fetch Othello who returns almost immediately, fully clothed. Considering that it is unlikely that Othello would respond to an urgent call by taking the time to redress, the logical conclusion is that, yet again, Othello and Desdemona have been thwarted.

The fact that Desdemona leaves with her attendants and later returns with them is further proof that husband and wife have not been alone together. The impression is that her servants had not yet been dismissed for the evening. It is logical to assume that if Othello and Desdemona had the time to be alone, her attendants would have already left her side.

While Othello and Desdemona have the opportunity to consummate their marriage after the fight, logic suggests they do not. Othello, having fired Cassio, a man he loved and trusted, is very upset and distracted. He is also concerned with the well-being of Montano who was wounded in the fight. His last words in Act 2, Scene 3 are to Montano, "Sir for your hurts,/Myself will be your surgeon" (2.3.227-228). He intends to take care of Montano himself that evening, leaving little time for Desdemona.

The next day, Othello's unfounded jealousy drives him to murder his wife. More proof of her virginity is provided before her death. After Othello accuses her of being a whore, Desdemona tells Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed, "Prithee, tonight/Lay on my bed my wedding sheets, remember;/And call thy husband hither" (4.2.108-109). The wedding sheets play an important role here. Specifically, the virginal blood expected from the first sexual encounter would show up on the sheets proving the
chastity of the bride. It makes sense that she requested her wedding sheets to be on the bed that evening for two reasons. First, they had not consummated their marriage yet so the sheets would be clean and could be used that evening. Second, upon consummating their marriage Othello would see the virginal blood and know that Desdemona was not the whore he had accused her of being.

Critics may argue that she wanted the sheets put on her bed to remind Othello that when they consummated their marriage she was a virgin. This theory does not make sense. If they had indeed already made love and the sheets were stained, why not just remind him of this fact? Furthermore, why would he question her chastity if he knew her to be a virgin upon their marriage?

Desdemona's request to Emilia in the next scene, after Emilia has told her that the sheets are on the bed, further disputes this argument, "If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me/In one of these same sheets" (4.3.25-26). Why would Desdemona want to be buried in blood-stained sheets? The answer is they were not stained because the marriage had not been consummated [consummated]. Othello makes a statement that is symbolic of their non-sexual relationship while preparing to kill Desdemona, "Yet I'll not shed her blood, . . ." (5.2.3). This proclamation has a dual meaning -- a literal and an ironic one. He will not cause Desdemona to bleed when he kills her that evening is the literal meaning. The irony is that he indeed will not "shed her blood" -- because he will not consummate his marriage, and thus know of her innocence.

Othello learns the truth about Desdemona and Cassio only after she is dead. Desdemona's purity upon her death is made clear by Emilia, before her own death, when she says "For thou hast killed the sweetest innocent/That e'er did lift up eye" (5.2.206-7).
Although it may not have been their intention, even in marriage, Desdemona remained innocent and chaste. Thus, it is a double irony that Othello erroneously murders his wife for sleeping with another man, but that he murders a wife who has not even slept with him.
Work Cited