

“Betray’d to Shame”:

Venice Preserved and the Paradox of She-Tragedy

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Introduction: Murdering Women

As is well known, when English theaters re-opened during the Restoration, women were allowed to act in them. This innovation would seem, initially, to be an unqualified boon for women, with a material gain (a new career) being made available to them. And yet, as critics such as Jean I. Marsden have shown, the phenomenon of actresses may actually have intensified women’s objectification.¹ For example, Marsden observes: “In a social system that had already identified women as commodities for homosocial exchange, the advent of the actress presented an opportunity for visual representation of this exchange” (9). Ironically, then, the freshly-minted career of actress generated new mechanisms whereby women were transformed into tradable goods. In any case, capitalizing on a cultural fascination with actresses, Restoration and eighteenth-century dramatists created a new dramatic form: she-tragedy. This sub-genre of plays, as Marsden has commented, showcases “the suffering and often tragic end of a central, female figure” (65). Paradoxically, perhaps, the female protagonists of she-tragedy assume center stage only so that their suffering and victimization can be emphasized.

An especially potent vehicle for examining how the doomed women of she-tragedy differ from the murdered (or murdering) women of Renaissance drama is provided in Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserved* (1682), which helped to inaugurate the genre of she-tragedy. But even as it heralds a new genre, Otway’s play likewise hearkens back to an earlier text: Shakespeare’s *Othello*. *Venice Preserved* can be grasped as a

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deliberate response to and adaptation of Shakespeare's play. More specifically, *Venice Preserved* re-constitutes the relationship between domestic and political concerns, and this new calibration of *Othello's* tensions seems designed to rescue the genre of tragedy from incursions by less-lofty subject matter.² When *Venice Preserved* is examined alongside its Shakespearean predecessor, the politics of she-tragedy shift into focus. Perhaps surprisingly, Otway's adaptation reasserts tragedy as a masculine space, and as the site of male privilege and prerogative.

Defining Adaptation

Because I am proposing to read *Venice Preserved* as an adaptation of *Othello*, a definition of adaptation is in order. Rather than viewing adaptation as merely a patchwork of similarities, or as a straightforward set of allusions to a 'primary' source, it is more productive to conceive of adaptation as a particular textual energy, a mode of transformation that highlights connections between texts and the conditions in which and for which they are produced. Interestingly, Otway's revisionist efforts prove to be similar to the principles of adaptation employed by Shakespeare in his re-working of source-materials for *Othello*.

Earlier definitions of adaptation tended to award preeminence to 'original' sources rather than their derivatives or descendants. For example, in his analysis of literary genealogy, Harold Bloom examines the ways in which poets must, necessarily, respond to the work of their predecessors. Fashioning an Oedipal myth out of "the relationship of works to their literary predecessors," Bloom suggests that writers (suffering from the anxiety-principle) attempt the "symbolic slaying" of the influential authors preceding them (9-11). In the first edition of *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom contends that Shakespeare is exempted from the fear provoked by having to compete with literary progenitors. Bloom writes: "Shakespeare belongs to the giant age

before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness" (11). Casting Shakespeare as reigning deity of the writers' Eden he imagines, Bloom suggests that texts are progressively more fallen the further they move from the sublimely creative moment in which the specter of influence was negligible. With Shakespeare as perpetual anomaly, each new generation of writers is painfully aware of falling from literary grace.

Traditionally, much of the critical work examining Shakespeare's use of sources has upheld Bloom's ranking-system and accepted his designation of Shakespeare's texts as exceptional. For example, we might consider Kenneth Muir's analysis of the relationship between *Othello* and its primary source, a chapter included in *Hecatommithi* (Ten Tales) by the Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio. Muir observes that in the Italian version of the tale, "Disdemona is a virtuous lady of great beauty who falls in love with the Moor, not out of lust or feminine appetite, but because of his virtues" (123). In the original text, the ur-Iago falls in love with Disdemona and subsequently concludes that she has not rejected him in favor of the Moor but because she prefers the Moor's second-in-command (who becomes Cassio in *Othello*). In Cinthio's narrative, therefore, the Iago-figure has a clearly defined motive for engineering discontent and catalyzing murder. Conversely, because Shakespeare's villain lacks a convincing or coherent motive, *Othello* ventures into new psychological and psychic spaces. While Muir acknowledges the primary difference between the two versions of Iago, he contends that Shakespeare was prompted to re-vamp Cinthio's text because he was captivated by "the dramatic possibilities of making a noble hero kill the woman he loved" (127). Notably, therefore, Muir professes to have isolated *the* factor that motivated Shakespeare to retell Cinthio's story. Summing up the relationship of *Othello* and its source, Muir concludes that Shakespeare "converts a sordid melodrama with a commonplace moral into a tragedy of love" (139). As we might predict, Muir identifies poetry as the principal magic Shakespeare uses to accomplish metamorphosis. Although Muir does not speak of adaptation *per se*, his reading does establish

relations between writings and retellings. Therefore, Muir's work does generate an axiom of adaptation, which is as follows: a superior writer (i.e., Shakespeare) revives an already existing story by bathing it in the purifying waters of his genius and artistry. What is missing, in this account of adaptation, is an acknowledgement of how adaptations respond to specific social, cultural, or political milieus.

Muir's assessment of *Othello* and its source stands in jarring contrast to the analysis offered by Barbara Everett. She begins with a warning: "the true source of a poet's creativity is a subject perhaps both over-large and over-hypothetical" (66). Having issued this caveat, Everett goes on to suggest that the problem of identifying the origins of creativity "can be translated into approachably smaller matters of fact by asking of Shakespeare's finished text of *Othello* a few questions so simple that it is surprising they have not been asked before" (66). She continues: "if we read the play the first word that we meet after the opening stage direction is the speech-prefix *Roderigo*" (66-67). This linguistic fact leads to Everett to her first question: "Why should the dramatist have bestowed on his Venetian gull a Spanish name?" (66-67). Everett provides an answer to her own query, which is worth quoting at some length:

Roderigo, who does not exist in Cinthio, depends wholly on his role as "feed" (in all senses) to the character called in Cinthio the Ensign: here made not the friend of the Moor but his subordinate, almost his servant. The gull provides the necessary social extraversion for this underhand character newly called Iago. Roderigo has a Spanish name, in short, because Iago has. (67)

At this juncture, Everett acknowledges that an even more intriguing question arises: "How then does Iago come to have a Spanish name?—and such a Spanish name at that?" (67). 'Iago' is, of course, the Spanish equivalent of 'James.' And, as Everett notes, this would have been a rather tantalizing fact to Shakespeare's contemporary audience, given that 'James' was the name of the newly-crowned monarch. Not incidentally, St. James, or Santiago, was likewise the patron saint of Spain, a designation awarded on the basis of what

Everett describes as “somewhat apocryphal historical events,” the chief among them being an appearance at an eleventh-century battle during which Spain decisively defeated Moorish troops (67). In light of this military success, Santiago was awarded the nickname “Moor-killer” (67). Commenting on the significance of these historical details, Everett suggests: “if ‘Roderigo’ came into Shakespeare’s play because of Iago, then ‘Iago’ came into the play because of Othello—the Moor-killer along with the Moor” (67). Everett’s careful attention to Shakespeare’s linguistic innovations allows her to show *Othello*’s imbrication in politics, and her reading demonstrates that the Spanish nomenclature Shakespeare employs capitalizes on his audience’s awareness of past tensions between England and Spain. Something akin to an archaeological impulse guides Everett’s discussion of *Othello*. Focusing on Shakespeare’s play as an adaptation, Everett uncovers significations that might otherwise go unnoticed by contemporary readers lacking knowledge of early modern global politics.

When we compare the two readings by Muir and Everett, a definition of adaptation begins to crystallize. Muir’s assessment reproduces the bias inherent in traditional source study, which means that Shakespeare’s alterations are described in terms of poetic genius, a stance that fails to illuminate the workings of adaptation. By contrast, Everett’s reading draws attention to the interface of text and context, as she shows how Shakespeare’s invigoration of his primary source for *Othello* fed off of (and likely also nourished) a specific political reality. Following Everett, adaptations have a special capacity to cross geocultural boundaries. In so doing, they envision or open up political contexts that would not have been anticipated in their source texts. Studying adaptations can, therefore, help to spotlight those elements that speak to particular social, cultural, or political issues. *Othello*, for instance, records Renaissance England’s dread of Spanish incursions, a point that shifts into focus especially when Shakespeare’s play is read alongside its primary source.

Venice Preserved as Corrective-Counterpoint

Venice Preserved provides additional evidence of this magic. More specifically, in capitalizing on his audience's interest in political intriguing and conspiratorial high jinks, Otway replaces *Othello's* marital anxieties with concerns more expressly martial in nature. In her analysis of *Venice Preserved*, Jessica Munns points out that in the wake of the Rye House Plot, which was supposed to be a scheme to assassinate Charles II and his brother James, Restoration audiences demonstrated an "enthusiasm for discovering plots against the state" (167). In the adaptation, tensions between domestic obligations and public duties become a principal structural device. Whereas *Othello* quickly dispenses with overtly martial concerns, in *Venice Preserved* the fomenting of rebellion fuels the plot. Instead of presenting marital concerns, or the demands of domestic life as an alternative to political intriguing, Otway's adaptation uses its primary female character as a means of disrupting political machinations.

From virtually its opening moments, *Venice Preserved* telegraphs its engagement with *Othello*. Both plays, for example, use clandestine marriage as catalyst and plot device. As Munns observes, "*Venice Preserved* [...] like *Othello*, opens with a description of a runaway marriage highly displeasing to the bride's father" (245). The rediscovery of familiar characters is one of the pleasures of reading a text as an adaptation, and Otway's deployment of the runaway-marriage plot readily suggests analogues for *Othello*, Iago, Desdemona, and her father Brabantio. Having left her father Priuli's house secretly, in order to marry Jaffeir, Belvidera is an apt counterpart of Desdemona. This means, in turn, that Jaffeir can be likened to *Othello*, and that Priuli is a descendant of Brabantio. Surely a re-writing of *Othello* needs an Iago. Otway obliges with the character of Pierre, Jaffeir's best friend. Pierre's status as villain, however, is certainly open to debate.

Venice Preserved complicates the whole question of heroes versus villains, because its warring factions, senators and rebels, both earn opprobrium. Or, as Kerstin P. Warner comments, "The rebels are as

greedy and tyrannical as the senators they plot against" (2). Still, some readers of *Venice Preserved* have tried to discern in it clear illustrations of heroism or villainy—an endeavour apparently not made easier over time. In 1777, as Warner notes, "British soldiers stationed in New York called for a revival of *Venice Preserved* as an expression of their Tory sympathies, while in the same year, in London, the play was banned for its 'dangerous republican tendencies'" (120). These clashing interpretations graphically illustrate that empathy has a political component. It seems altogether fitting that an adaptation of *Othello* would de-stabilize the categories of hero and villain. Shakespeare's play, after all, broke with tradition by featuring a tragic hero who occupies the position of cultural outsider and alien.

If readers of *Venice Preserved* must wrestle with the issue of where sympathies or loyalties are to be directed, this dilemma replicates the situations confronting the respective heroes of *Othello* and *Venice Preserved*. In Shakespeare's play, Othello is forced to choose between trusting his increasingly guilty-seeming wife and placing his faith in Iago. Similarly, in *Venice Preserved*, Jaffeir wavers between loyalty to his wife (who is the daughter of a senator) and loyalty to his friend Pierre, who urges participation in the fomenting rebellion. To be more precise, Jaffeir must divest himself of distractions that hinder devotion to overtly political causes. Evidently Belvidera is the chief such distraction. After she follows Jaffeir to a meeting of fellow conspirators, Jaffeir instructs his would-be allies:

Take her from my heart,
 She'll gain such hold else, I shall ne'er get loose.
 I charge thee take her, but with tender'st care,
 Relieve her troubles and assuage her sorrows. (2.3.192-95)

With this speech, Jaffeir articulates the incompatibility of domestic obligations (in this case, Belvidera herself) and political engagement. As his wife leaves with her protector, Renault, Jaffeir offers this pledge of fealty to the conspirators:

To you, sirs, and your honors, I bequeath [Belvidera],
 And with her this [i.e., his dagger], when I prove unworthy—

You know the rest—Then strike it to her heart,
 And tell her, he, who three whole happy years
 Lay in her arms, and each kind night repeated
 The passionate vows of still increasing love,
 Sent that reward for all her truth and sufferings. (2.3.197-203)

When Belvidera objects to Jaffeir's pledge, he dismisses her by saying, "I've contrived thy honor" (2.3.208). Effectively transferring his authority over Belvidera to another man, Jaffeir reprises a scene from *Othello*, wherein the hero directs Iago to care for Desdemona.

As fans of *Othello* (or any other savvy readers) would predict, Jaffeir's plan turns out to be ill conceived. The morning after she has been entrusted to the care of Renault, Belvidera reports:

I'm sacrificed! I am sold! betrayed to shame!
 Inevitable ruin has enclosed me!
 No sooner was I to my bed repaired,
 To weigh, and (weeping) ponder my condition,
 But the old hoary wretch, to whose false care
 My peace and honor was entrusted, came
 (Like Tarquin) ghastly with infernal lust.
 O thou Roman Lucrece!
 Thou couldst find friends to vindicate thy wrong;
 I never had but one, and he's proved false;
 He that should guard my virtue has betrayed it;
 [...]. (3.2.1-11)

Belvidera's classical allusion recalls a narrative that features the very confusion of personal and political concerns which defines—and destroys—her relationship with Jaffeir. Pursuing implications of Belvidera's invocation of Lucrece, it seems that *Venice Preserved* does offer a pointed critique of absolute (monarchical) power's excesses. After all, in Livy's *History of Rome*, the story of Lucrece's "ravishment" (and suicide) functions as incentive for Rome to reject the yoke of colonial tyranny and found a republic.

If Lucrece is to be accepted as a female exemplum, it seems that the good woman whose honor is assailed has no option other than suicide. As if to challenge the cultural ideal that requires suicide of (female) rape victims, which seems a tacit admission of their guilt, Bel-

videra assigns responsibility for her plight to Jaffeir.³ Although the attack on Belvidera occurs off-stage, her reappearance in a disheveled and unnerved state serves to eroticize her suffering. As Marsden suggests, showcasing the bodily effects of violence threatened or perpetrated against female characters was a staple feature of Restoration and eighteenth-century drama. Marsden reports that plays from this period often treat rape (or the threat of rape) as “an explicitly sexual situation that foregrounds the sexuality of the actress” (76). To draw out implications of Belvidera’s plight, it is useful to contrast it with Desdemona’s murder. It, too, is suffused with eroticism. Consider, for example, that Othello stands over his inert and sleeping wife and states: “I will kill thee and love thee after” (5.2.18-19). This moment, described by Edward Pechter as “overtly necrophiliac,” hints that Desdemona will be at her most desirable once she is dead (144). Perhaps this is because, in death, Desdemona best attains the Renaissance ideal for women: she is “silent, chaste, and obedient.”⁴

In Shakespeare’s play (if not in recent film versions), Desdemona is a passive and seemingly acquiescent victim—as Alan Sinfield suggests, Desdemona never really opposes her murder; by contrast, as we have seen, Belvidera levies an accusation at Jaffeir.⁵ For a short duration, Belvidera’s admonitory words seem to take effect. Specifically, Jaffeir becomes convinced that the Senate must be informed of the rebels’ plot. At this juncture Jaffeir shifts allegiance once more, with loyalty to Belvidera supplanting fealty to the conspirators. This turn of events, however, fails to please Jaffeir, who almost immediately regrets his decision to reveal the conspiracy. Actually, he exhibits an almost hysterical reluctance to betraying his fellow rebels. Rather melodramatically, albeit with a degree of prescience, Jaffeir punctuates his journey to the Senate, where he plans to reveal the plot, with these words:

Where dost thou lead me? Every step I move,
Methinks I tread upon some mangled limb
Of a racked friend. (4.1.1-3)

This plaintive speech is addressed to Belvidera. Commenting upon his wife's role in compelling him to reveal the plot, Jaffeir likens himself to a "lamb" that is led by "the enticing flattering priestess" to "sacrifice" (4.1.87-90).

The final scene in the play highlights the theme of loyalty versus betrayal, as Jaffeir vows his love for Pierre and grants him one last favor. Even before hearing what Pierre desires of him, Jaffeir declares:

Thy wishes shall be satisfied.
I have a wife and she shall bleed, my child too
Yield up his little throat, and all t'appease thee—
[...] (5.3.84-86)

Here Jaffeir expresses a nearly frenzied desire to prove that his friendship with Pierre trumps all other relationships. Jaffeir's statement is bizarre, and we might well ask why two male characters' bond can best be demonstrated through the murder of a woman and her child. Of course, Jaffeir's violent promise makes more sense if *Venice Preserved* is read as an adaptation of *Othello*. In the earlier play, the hero makes a "sacred vow" to Iago, promising his friend endless fealty (3.4.461). In a way, Jaffeir's strange vow reprises the 'betrothal scene' between Othello and Iago. In Otway's version, however, the violence with which Jaffeir threatens Belvidera graphically illustrates how male friendship is ratified by the destruction of a woman.

Pierre and Jaffeir's relationship is to be sealed in blood, but it will be their own. Pointing to the wheel that is to be the instrument of his torture and death, Pierre asks his friend for a nobler end. His last hope for evading the ignominy—and the grotesque suffering—of torture rests with Jaffeir. Jaffeir obliges, killing Pierre and then stabbing himself. The ghost of *Othello* looms over this conclusion, as Shakespeare's hero, too, stabs himself after killing his beloved. *Venice Preserved* makes it much easier to believe that murder is performed in the service of love, because the speedy death Jaffeir imparts to Pierre does enable the latter to escape torture.

Death does not quite spell the end of Jaffeir and Pierre's relationship. In tandem they return, seemingly as ghosts or apparitions, just long enough to scare Belvidera. She may not be scared to death, exactly, but the ghostly visitation precedes (if it does not precipitate) her demise. With her dying words, Belvidera cries:

They have hold on me, and drag me to the bottom.
Nay—now they pull so hard—farewell— (5.4.28-29)

It does seem that Jaffeir and Pierre drag Belvidera to her death, but their motives remain mysterious. The heroine's demise might be intended as a reversal of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, with Jaffeir unable to fade into oblivion without his wife. Or, alternatively, the death of Belvidera may be intended as poetic justice, signalling her punishment for encroaching upon Jaffeir and Pierre's relationship and muddying political waters with the force of her desire.

In a spectacle that clearly seems to be tinged with horror, Belvidera appears to glimpse what awaits her after she dies. This moment powerfully re-invokes *Othello*. Shakespeare's hero, like Belvidera, 'sees' his own destruction just prior to experiencing it. Speaking almost literally over the dead body of his wife, Othello focuses attention upon his own life. He recalls an episode in which he had dispensed with an enemy of the Venetian state, detailing an incident in which

A malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state. (5.2.354-55)

From Othello's description, it is clear that the "turban'd Turk" metonymizes evil and is opposed by the implicitly 'good' Venetian. Demonstrating his association with the good, Othello narrates his actions with these words:

I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus. (5.2.356-57)

Othello's words showcase his understanding of the slippage in his status: formerly an avenging force on the side of Venice, Othello now

becomes the evil in need of containment. Ania Loomba convincingly shows how Othello is, finally, a “near schizophrenic hero,” one who “becomes simultaneously the Christian and the infidel” (48). In *Venice Preserved*, it is Belvidera who functions as the evil that must be contained. She constitutes a disruption, with her very presence apparently threatening the creation and maintenance of overtly politicized bonds between men. As Belvidera herself states, she is “betrayed to shame,” the unwitting victim of political machinations and complex webs of loyalty that perpetually exclude her. In this example of she-tragedy, the female protagonist is a ‘present-absence,’ a catalyst of but never fully a participant in the action.

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NOTES

¹My essay endeavors to build on Marsden’s fine analysis of actresses as commodified sexual spectacles. Whereas Marsden mainly focuses on the ways in which actresses transformed material conditions, my argument centers more on the evolution of tragic conventions.

²*Venice Preserved*’s curious intermingling of personal and public concerns has elicited a somewhat dissatisfied readership. For example, Aline Mackenzie Taylor notes that while *Venice Preserved* is “the play on which Otway’s fame rests most securely,” praise of it is always “tempered with censure, if only a vague suggestion that despite its passion, there is something in it which is fundamentally not quite right” (195). Taylor explains the source of readers’ displeasure as “the political bias of what is otherwise a tragedy of private life” (195). It might be more fitting to re-state the play’s difficulties in this way: while *Venice Preserved* wishes to eschew the personal or domestic strife of *Othello*, it actually ends up exposing the interweaving of domestic and political concerns.

³Belvidera’s indictment of Jaffeir may resonate persuasively with contemporary readers; however, it is not at all clear that Otway’s original audience would have sided with Belvidera. After all, as Deborah G. Burks has demonstrated, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “The dual nature of rape as violation and pleasure was embedded in the very terms used to identify the crime: rape and ravishment” (7). The advent of actresses seemed to invite spectacles of female suffering. As Marsden comments, actresses were subjected to the “audience’s

gaze, established as desirable, and then driven into prolonged and often fatal suffering" (60).

⁴See Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640*, for a thorough examination of the promulgation of feminine ideals.

⁵See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines*, for a discussion of Desdemona's seeming inability to speak in her own defense, even when her murder is imminent. A curious parallel in criticism of *Othello* and *Venice Preserved* concerns contempt for their respective heroines. For example, in his monumental and influential study, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A. C. Bradley comments that Desdemona's suffering "is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores" (179). Belvidera is rendered in uncompromisingly scornful terms by Lord Byron, who describes Otways's character as "that maudlin bitch of chaste lewdness and blubbering curiosity," and he claims to "utterly despise, abhor, and detest" her (qtd. in Munns 187).

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