Heathen Husband: The Corrupting Patriarchal Hierarchy in Shakespeare’s Othello and Its Absence in Cinthio’s Gli Hecatommithi

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ABSTRACT

HEATHEN HUSBAND: THE CORRUPTING PATRIARCHAL HIERARCHY IN SHAKESPEARE’S OTHELLO AND ITS ABSENCE IN CINTHIO’S GLI HECATOMMITHI

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This thesis places William Shakespeare’s Othello within cultural context to examine the moral corruption that Desdemona and Othello undergo once they fulfill marital roles within a patriarchal hierarchy that reflects the hierarchy religious conduct literature calls on Christians to maintain within marriage. At the same time, this thesis contrasts Shakespeare’s Othello with the Italian story of Disdemona and a Moorish captain within Decade Three of Cinthio’s Gli Hecatommithi. Hecatommithi does not ascribe a corrupting power to patriarchal hierarchy or explore Othello’s downfall in relation to his Christian faith. This thesis determines that the alterations Shakespeare makes to Othello’s source material emphasize that the corrupting factor of Othello is patriarchal hierarchy through presenting Othello and Desdemona as achieving pious companionate tranquility at the start of the play when they do not maintain a relationship that aligns with the patriarchal hierarchy that religious conduct literature outlines and undergoing paradoxical corruption once they establish a patriarchal hierarchy within their marriage.
HEATHEN HUSBAND: THE CORRUPTING PATRIARCHAL HIERARCHY
IN SHAKESPEARE’S OTHELLO AND ITS ABSENCE
IN CINTHIO’S GLI HECATOMMITHI

BY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 OUTSIDE THE BOUNDS OF CONVENTION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 CORRUPTION AND CONTRADICTION</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 REVELATION</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

English Renaissance society regarded women as inferior to men. Religious conduct literature such as the Elizabethan church’s official “Homily of the State of Matrimony” (1563), William Perkins’ *Christian Oeconomie* (1609), William Whately’s *A Bride-Bush* (1617), and William Gouge’s *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622) assert that Scripture provides evidence of man’s superiority and thereby justification for a patriarchal hierarchy in which the wife is expected to obey the husband and exhibit deference toward him. These works claim that such a structure establishes the husband and wife’s religiosity and leads to a happy marriage. Various critics have explored the part that marital roles play in *Othello’s* tragedy. Numerous arguments have been made regarding the function of patriarchy, Christianity, and even the play’s reflective depiction of religious conduct literature’s tenets in relation to marital roles. This study redirects that critical conversation, arguing that the concepts of patriarchal hierarchy such as those outlined by religious conduct literature corrupt Othello and Desdemona. Shakespeare’s *Othello* presents this perspective as a matter of contrast with the connection between religion and patriarchal hierarchy in its source narrative within *Gli Hecatommiti*, by Giovani Battista Giraldi (nicknamed Cinthio).

When Othello and Desdemona’s relationship does not align with the patriarchal hierarchy set out by religious conduct literature, Othello and Desdemona maintain Christian virtue and domestic tranquility, but when their marriage reflects the patriarchal hierarchy emphasized by religious conduct literature, their faith and happiness dissolve. Shakespeare’s source for *Othello,*
the Italian story of Desdemona and a Moorish captain (“The Moor of Venice”) within Decade Three of Cinthio’s *Gli Hecatommithi*, does not ascribe a corrupting power to patriarchal hierarchy or explore Othello and Desdemona’s downfall in relation to the religious conceptions conduct literature presents regarding this hierarchy within marriage. Instead, that Italian story attributes its tragedy to the Moor’s racial nature. I find that *Othello* changes its source material to emphasize the corrupting factor of the patriarchal hierarchy within marriage that conduct literature calls for, through demonstrating that it is Othello and Desdemona’s fulfillment of marital positions reflective of those that comprise this hierarchy that leads to their corruption and thereby reveals the harmful paradox this hierarchy is capable of enacting.
Although the English Renaissance was a time of religious conflict, the majority of religious conduct literature from the era relies on Christian Scripture to establish justification for a patriarchal hierarchy within marriage. “Homily of the State of Matrimony” (1563), belonging to *The Book of Homilies* that “form[ed] part of the basic formularies of the Church of England,”¹ was one of the most prevalent pieces of religious conduct literature. The “Homily” makes continuous reference to varying portions of Scripture while establishing marital duty. Scripture’s call on “ye wives, be in subjection to obey your own husbands,” as the woman is “the weaker vessel,”² forms the basis of its call for a patriarchal hierarchy. The “Homily” asserts that these tenets justify its claim that “the husband is the head of the woman, as Christ is the Head of the Church,” and therefore, a wife should “obey thy husband, take regard of his requests, and give heed unto him to perceive what he requireth of thee; and so shalt thou honour God, and live peaceably in thy house.”³ It also argues that this patriarchal hierarchy is necessary because it can guide the wife away from and prevent immoral behavior through providing the husband with the ability to place demands on her to follow Christian tenets, implying that the husband is also

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³ 476.
morally superior: “But thou peradventure wilt say, that she is a wrathful woman, a drunkard, a beastly [of a depraved character often indicative of unrestrained indulgence of carnal sin⁴], without wit and reason. For this cause bewail her the more. Chafe not in anger, but pray to Almighty God. Let her be admonished and holpen with good counsel, and do thou thy best endeavour that she may be delivered of all these affections… be commanded to counterfeit angels, or rather God himself thorough meekness.”⁵ The “Homily” conveys that marital tranquility and religiosity is achieved through establishing a patriarchal hierarchy in which the husband maintains a position of superiority over the wife that grants him the power to demand she obey him and exhibit deference toward him.

William Whatley’s A Bride-Bush (1617) directly echoes the “Homily of the state of Matrimony’s” calls for a patriarchal hierarchy within marriage. William Whatley was a clergyman for the Church of England and a Puritan preacher, who is notably presumed to have given a number of lectures in Stratford Upon Avon during the early seventeenth century.⁶ Therefore, it is fitting that his text closely resembles a “Homily” that formed the basis of the Puritan Church’s doctrine. Like the “Homily,” Whately’s A Bride-Bush relies on Scripture’s denotation of women as the weaker sex to establish justification for a patriarchal hierarchy in an

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⁵ 481.

attempt to provide a path towards virtue, as opposed to overt indoctrination. Whatley also strengthens the basis for the husband to govern his wife in matters of morality, through asserting that if the husband does not do so he is not following God’s will: “For as the Ministers must watch over the souls of their flocke for their profite and saluation…so must the husband deale with his wife: for this is the end why God hath ordained …hee must aime at her good, so must hee effect it, by gouerning in a right manner, to the nourishing and encreasing of whatsoeuer vertue, rooting out and weakning of whatsoeuer corruption hee shall meete with in her.”

Although conduct literature by certain English Calvinists emphasizes that the husband and wife must exhibit equality of honor and love towards each other to establish a successful marriage, this does not prevent them from calling for the patriarchal hierarchy that Whatley and the “Homily” outline. Like Whately, William Perkins and William Gouge were clergymen for the Church of England. However, both men were Calvinist leaning. Gouge was recognized as one of the key “upholders…of Calvinist orthodoxy,” and Perkins a theologian whose works, “represent a conventional recital of Calvinist scholasticism in virtually every respect.” Perkin’s *Christian Oeconomie* (1609) speaks in terms of equality regarding husband and wife through claiming that all of the husband’s duties arise from the need for him to “loue his wife euen as

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8 21-22.


himself…[t]o honor his wife.” However, regarding his wife in this manner does not displace the husband’s position of “authority ouer the wife” and his duty to “reproue & admonish her,” as Perkins reinforces the wife’s duties that the “Homily” and *A Bride Bush* outline, stating that she is “to submit her selfe to her husband; and to acknowledge and reuerence him as her head in all things…to be obedient vnto her husband in all things.”

11 Gouge’s *Of Domestical Duties* (1622) echoes Perkins’ message and adds that the husband’s love and respect for his wife “requireth no equality [of position], as if it were possible for an Husband in that measure to loue his wife, as Christ loued his Church; (for as Christ in excellency and greatnesse exceedeth man, so in loue and tendernesse) But it noteth an equity, and like quality.”

12 Although the Calvinist preachers assert that there is a need for mutual affection between husband and wife, unlike the “Homily” and *Of Domestical Duties*, they do not call for equality of marital position.

Despite the lack of emphasis that “Homily of the State of Matrimony” and *A Bride-Bush* place on mutual affection between husband and wife, both texts agree with the Calvinists’ disparagement of violence within marriage as sinful. The Calvinists argue that if a husband maintains love and respect for his wife, he will prevent himself from displaying sinful violence. Perkins outlines their reasoning through asserting that by giving love and honor to his wife the husband will recognize that they are “mates; and they two be one flesh. And no man will hate,

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much lesse beat his owne flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it.”

Although the “Homily” and A Bride-Bush do not emphasize a need for the husband to ensure that he displays the same level of love and honor towards his wife that she displays toward him, they do touch on marital affection when condemning violence against one’s wife as sinful. Whately asserts that the husband should exhibit love toward his wife, as “he [who] loues her not much…will cause their affections to warpe and chap, till all be full of dissention,” and that such love is displayed when he “[b]e not extreme violence of words and gesture...healthfully sharpe and earnest, when a man in plainnesse & with good termes layes open the absurdity, naughtinesse and danger of the sinne, enforcing these considerations vpon the heart and conscience of the party.”

Whately’s mention of love is in regard to the wife’s view of her husband as opposed to the husband’s view of his wife, and is only mentioned as Whately regards it as necessary for the husband to maintain his position of authority within the patriarchal hierarchy. While Whatley and the “Homily” place importance on the need for the husband to obtain respect and love from his wife through lack of violence so that he does not lose his position, Perkins and Gouge assert that if the husband maintains respect and love for his wife, he will prevent himself from rising to violence in the first place. Although the texts vary in their reasoning and religious leanings, they all assert that violence against one’s wife is sinful and regard the husband’s position as one of authority over

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13 128.
14 31-32.
15 474-475.
16 355.
his wife, who as an inferior is expected to fulfill a position of deferent obedience. These texts reflect a widespread support for this patriarchal hierarchy within English Renaissance society around the turn of the seventeenth century.

At the start of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Othello and Desdemona’s marriage does not reflect the patriarchal hierarchy that religious conduct literature denotes as proper and necessary for them to establish as Christians and obtain happiness, for as the play first introduces their marriage in Act One, it becomes clear that Othello does not “keepe his authority”\(^\text{17}\) over Desdemona through demanding obedience and deference from her. There is little interaction between Othello and Desdemona during their first scene together. Instead, this scene focuses on the couple’s explanation of their relationship, which both maintain was brought on by their “love” (1.3.92) for each other.\(^\text{18}\) The Calvinists appeal to the husband and wife to maintain love for each other; however, Othello does not fulfill a position of patriarchal authority within this scene through calling on Desdemona to obey any demands or show him deference, which is the position that all religious conduct literature surveyed calls on the husband to fulfill. Although Desdemona does not assert that she has no desire to “reside” (1.3.242) in Venice with her father until Othello states that “[he’ll] not have it so” (1.3.242), such an order of speech, appearing only once in this scene, does not provide enough evidence to show that Desdemona fulfills the position of obedient, deferent wife within their marriage. Furthermore, the reasoning that Desdemona provides for wanting to reside with Othello in Cyprus, “My heart’s subdued / Even

\(^{17}\) Gouge, 19.

to the very quality of my lord: I saw Othello’s visage in his mind / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (1.3.251-255), prevents an association of patriarchal hierarchy with Desdemona’s desire, as her explanation of “quality” as in relation to her love for Othello reveals that her “subdued” feeling is regarding her openness to experiencing such a move in order to be with him as opposed to a willingness to obey any demands that Othello makes of her or to exhibit necessary deference toward him. The reasoning that Desdemona provides for wanting to join Othello, which Eamon Grennan aptly characterizes as “a liberated dedication of self which presumes upon a complex equality,”19 and his own desire for her to accompany him to avoid having to remain with her enraged father gives validation to their assertion that their relationship is founded on a balance of mutual affection. This factor alone does not provide enough evidence to ascertain if Desdemona’s assertion that “I may profess / [my duty of obedience] Due to the Moor my lord” (1.3.188-189) is said in an attempt to further convince her father, the Venetian Duke, and Senators that Brabantio can no longer make any claim as her father that she “owe [him] obedience” (1.3.179) and thus has grounds to demand that she return to him and nullify her relationship with Othello. However, the behavior that Desdemona and Othello exhibit once they arrive in Cyprus reveals that Desdemona does not maintain a position of obedience and Othello a position of patriarchal superiority within their relationship.

When Desdemona and Othello arrive in Cyprus their interactions reveal that their relationship does not align with the patriarchal hierarchy of conduct literature. When the two

meet, Othello refers to Desdemona as “my fair warrior!,” and Desdemona refers to Othello as “My dear Othello” (2.1.179-180). Lisa Hopkins asserts that Othello only exhibits “‘love’ for the ‘gentle Desdemona,’ …Othello’s love…will endure only so long as he finds her ‘gentle,’” in allusion to his earlier reference of her as gentle, indicating that Othello prescribes to conduct literature’s positive denotation of women as the weaker sex. However, through referring to Desdemona dotingly as a powerful warrior, Othello disrupts her classification as the weaker sex and places clear value on her strength, thereby showing that her gentleness is not what sustains his love. Although Othello does use the possessive “my” to refer to Desdemona, she does the same of Othello, and he does not admonish Desdemona for her lack of deference in referring to him possessively and informally in a public setting. Through her possessive informality, Desdemona fails to meet the duty of a Christian wife to “expresse reuerence towards her husband in her speeches and gestures before him and in his presence to others” that conduct literature emphasizes as necessary for the wife to meet to successfully fulfill her position as deferent inferior. Othello also praises the current state of their relationship by associating his own happiness with her mere presence, without any indication of his own superiority: “If I were now to die / ‘Twere now to be most happy” (2.1.186-187).

When Desdemona first attempts to convince Othello to reconcile with Cassio, while voicing her plan for Cassio’s suit, her behavior goes against the deference that conduct literature calls on wives to exhibit, for she asserts playfully that she will demand that Othello meet Cassio:

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20 The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 150.
21 Whatley, 40.
My lord shall never rest
I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience,
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift
I'll intermingle everything he does
With Cassio’s suit. (3.3.22-26)

The conduct literature surveyed does not ascribe the wife any educative duties regarding her husband. Furthermore, a wife approaching her husband in this didactive manner would prevent the formation of a patriarchal hierarchy, for according to the conduct literature on marriage, a husband’s position of superiority within the patriarchal hierarchy extends him the power to “instruct and order the mind of thy [his] spouse.” Desdemona proceeds to go through with her plan to cast aside deference, and it does not invoke anger nor suspicion in Othello. Although Carol Thomas Neely argues that from the start of the play Othello shows that he exhibits the “sexually possessive and envious” masculine behavior common of Renaissance men that arises from their position of superiority as head, Othello’s response shows that at this point he is neither possessive or envious, as he does not exhibit suspicion over Desdemona’s affections for another man. He speaks to her lovingly, telling her “Not now, sweet Desdemona, some other time.” However, she refuses to accept this response, and asks him, “But shall’t be shortly,” to which he responds, “The sooner, sweet, for you” (3.3.55-57), in demonstration that he is agreeing to her call for this meeting to occur soon and is providing her with a more definite answer than “some other time” because of her refusal to accept it. Through Desdemona’s refusal

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22 “Homily of the State of Matrimony,” 481.

to accept Othello’s first response, she reveals that she is not showing deference, while Othello’s calm responses shows that her behavior does not disrupt their bliss.

Desdemona continues to exhibit a lack of deference when she demands that Othello provide her with a precise time and Othello still remains happy and calm, in further indication that he is not of a jealous or possessive nature. Desdemona spends fourteen lines demanding to know “When he shall” (3.3.60) allow Cassio to come, and Othello shows that he is still not angry or demanding that she put an end to her questioning when he replies, “Let him come when he will, / I will deny thee nothing” (3.3.60-61). He reaffirms this by stating, “I will deny thee nothing / Whereon I do beseech thee, grant me this, / To leave me but a little to myself” (3.3.83-85). Grennan asserts that Othello’s responses here signify a change in the behavior the couple has maintained thus far, reading them as conveying a “refusal to hear her… [a] refusal to allow her speech to have any free, dependable being in their world.”

Othello “beseech[es]” Desdemona to make the decision to “grant” him reprieve, as opposed to demanding that she stop. This conveys the respect he holds for Desdemona’s autonomy and demonstrates that he is not attempting to prevent her freedom. Through Othello’s lack of anger over Desdemona’s autonomous display or attempt to place demands on her to stop, he shows that he and Desdemona do not maintain positions within their marriage that align with the patriarchal hierarchy of conduct literature, and yet they are able to achieve blissful peacefulness.

Although Disdemona and the Moor’s relationship within Cinthio’s *Hecathomathi* does not focus heavily on the need for a patriarchal hierarchy within marriage, their relationship aligns

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24 286.
with the marital hierarchy of conduct literature. The tale’s opening asserts that “[s]o propitious was their [Disdemona and the Moor’s] mutual love that, although the Lady’s relatives did all they could to make her take another husband, they were united in marriage and lived together in such concord and tranquility while they remained in Venice that never a word passed between them that was not loving”\(^{25}\) (242). Whately and the “Homily” do not emphasize the need for mutuality of love and respect within marriage, but they do not disparage it as preventing the husband from fulfilling his position as head. Gouge and Perkins, who agree with these texts’ call for patriarchal hierarchy within marriage, urge this mutuality.\(^{26}\) Mutual affection, such as that of Cinthio’s and Shakespeare’s lovers at the start, can exist within the patriarchal hierarchy as well as beyond it. “The Moor of Venice” goes on to demonstrate that Disdemona desires for her husband to go to Cyprus because she “had no other happiness on earth but the Moor” (242). Disdemona’s position conveys that her husband is her sole focus in life and that his feelings take precedent over her own, and therefore, that she looks to him as her head.

Following the reasoning Cinthio’s Disdemona gives for wanting the Moor to go to Cyprus, she approaches him with the issue and further demonstrates her fulfillment of the role of obedient, deferent wife. Disdemona commences her discussion with the Moor questioning but not commanding: “Why is it, my Moor, that after being given such an honourable rank by the Signoria, you are so melancholy?”\(^{27}\) Although she answers his reply of his melancholy being a result of his “see[ing] that one of two things must happen: either I must take you with me in peril


\(^{26}\) Perkins, 1245-126 & Gouge, 45.
by sea, or, so as to not cause you this hardship, I must leave you in Venice,” with a call for him to “‘[g]et ready then for the voyage in the cheerfulness that befits the high rank you hold’” (243), it is because she chooses to elevate his fears over putting her in danger in belief that she must put her husband’s desires first, as opposed to showing her inhabiting a position of authority that allows her to place demands on her husband that he must obey. Her earlier assertion that she is approaching the Moor because his happiness is her top priority confirms this. Disdemona’s approach marks a difference between her and Shakespeare’s Desdemona, who disregards deference and obedience through pushing Othello to hear Cassio’s suit and refusing to drop the issue until he provides her with clear indication that he will.

Whereas the protagonists’ relationship in Cinthio’s story tends toward the patriarchal hierarchy that religious conduct literature of the English Renaissance urges, in Othello the lack of deference that Desdemona displays toward Othello and the lack of demands made by Othello for her to obey him reveal that their relationship does not align with the patriarchal hierarchy that religious conduct literature relays. Through altering the marital dynamics between Othello and Desdemona from its source material, Othello creates a structure in which audiences can recognize that Othello and Desdemona’s corruption occurs only after there is a change in their marital dynamics in later Acts.

Othello’s confirmation of Desdemona’s Christianity and its thorough discussion of Othello’s faith prior to their corruption provides a further contrast between Othello and “The Moor of Venice” that allows the play to explore its theme of corruption. The opening of Othello depicts Othello as maintaining the position of Christian. The first indication of Othello’s Christianity is given when he makes reference to his “perfect soul” (1.2.31). Although a
classification of one’s soul as pure does not directly confirm his Christian faith, the Christian Brabantio disputes Othello’s classification through asserting that his soul is “Dammed” (1.2.63). This counterattack provides scope for Othello’s meaning as showing that his soul is not dammed but pure by Christian standards. Throughout this scene Othello further aligns himself with Christianity, as he asserts that he will inform the Christian Venetians of what has transpired between Desdemona and him “as truly as to heaven” and “Vouch with me, heaven” (1.3.124, 162), indicating that he prescribes to their Christian beliefs of heaven. Othello solidifies his position as Christian when classifying the behavior that Cassio exhibits through fighting Roderigo as of “Christian shame” and questioning if his behavior shows “Are we turned Turks? and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?” (2.3.165-167). Through use of the pronouns “we” and “ourselves” Othello classifies himself as one of the Christians who are against the non-Christian and thereby heathenistic Turks and in claiming that heaven has forbidden such behavior, disparaging these actions as sinful, while also showing that his Christian faith at this moment exceeds that of the Christian Venetians who surround him, “for he alone remembers ‘Christian shame.’”

Othello’s greatest enemy, Iago, also affirms Othello’s Christianity. Iago claims, “To win the Moor, were’t to renounce his baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin” (2.3.337-338). Even when alone, Iago is unable to dispute that Othello is a faithful Christian whom baptism has purified of any past heathenism and whose avoidance of sin since means he must now be driven to it. Although he goes on to claim that Othello’s love for Desdemona is so great

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that it can drive him from his faith, “His soul is so enfettered to her love / That she may make, unmake, do what she list, / Even as her appetite shall play the god” (2.3.240-243), through asserting that this has not happened, Iago further proves that Othello maintains his faith at this point in the play. The value that Othello places in his Christian faith and Iago’s own affirmation of it qualifies Catherine Cleland’s claim that before the play starts, through a clandestine marriage with Desdemona not sanctioned by religious ceremony, Othello knowingly “confirms his religious otherness, renouncing his baptism in the process.” Although Cleland’s claim for Othello’s religious otherness makes sense on one level in the fact that Othello does not follow religious convention when he marries Desdemona clandestinely and through establishing a marriage that does not entail a patriarchal hierarchy, Iago’s and his confirmation of his Christianity reveals that his actions do not result in eradication of faith as he continues to follow the Book of Common Prayer’s “Baptism’s” underlying call for those of Christian faith to “forsake the Devil and all his woorkes, to believe in God, and to serve hym.”

Limited statements are made regarding Desdemona’s Christianity; however, Brabantio’s condemnation of Othello indicates that Desdemona was raised in a Christian household. Brabantio bases his claim against Othello on the belief that Othello is a heathen, effectively conveying his own position as Christian. Brabantio shows that this means that Desdemona was raised as Christian, for he claims that her falling in love with Othello must be a result of his utilizing “practices of cunning hell” (1.3.103). This implies that Brabantio now views Othello as


a heathen of devilish nature. Because Brabantio presumes that Othello needed to exert hellish practices on Desdemona to lead her to love him, we can infer that he views his daughter as a Christian. It is understandable that *Othello* does not dedicate a large portion of time convincing audiences that the white Desdemona who comes from a Christian society is Christian, as opposed to Othello whose outward appearance as Moor produces a greater need to make it clear to audiences that he is Christian.

In contrast to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, focus on the Moor’s Christian faith is glaringly absent from Cinthio’s “The Moor of Venice,” and definite indication of Disdemona’s faith is not given until the end of the tale. The Moor maintains virtue solely due to his valor. Cinthio’s tale opens with a description of the Moor as “valiant” and affirms that the Moor has achieved virtue through his valiant actions in battle by informing readers that after “giv[ing] proof in warfare of great prudence and skillful energy, he was very dear to the Signoria” (242). Although Othello is clearly valued for his valor in *Othello*, as the Duke and senators emphasize at the start of the play through referring to Othello as “valiant” and calling to “straight employ you / Against the general enemy Ottoman” (1.3.47-50), Shakespeare places clear importance on his Christianity through demonstrating that it is important to Othello and that bringing him to “renounce” (2.3.238) it is what Iago believes will lead to his undoing. Like the Moor, no discussion is had on Disdemona’s faith when establishing her virtue, and unlike Desdemona, whose father gives indication of her Christian faith at the start of the play, comment is not made on her allegiance to Christianity until the end of the tale.

Although critics have explored the changes to its source that *Othello* makes regarding religion’s role, they do not connect this to the play’s exploration of a patriarchal hierarchy and its
religious basis. Cherrell Guilfoyle recognizes that Shakespeare’s emphasis on religion differs from Othello’s source and asserts that this is done to create a “Christian mythology” with the goal of praising Christian innocence within Desdemona. Joan Ozark Holmer also recognizes that “spiritual warfare” is absent from Cinthio’s tale but asserts that it is Desdemona’s faith that is emphasized to show her fulfilling the position of a “Christian soldier” who fights for Christianity to prevail within Othello. Through establishing that Desdemona and Othello are of Christian faith at the start of the play while maintaining a relationship that does not align with the hierarchy of religious conduct literature and altering the lack of emphasis on faith contained in its source material, Othello is able to demonstrate that the corruption that Desdemona and Othello undergo as the play continues regards Christian faith, and its blame aligns with the only change that occurs in their relationship: fulfillment of the marital positions that comprise conduct literature’s patriarchal hierarchy.

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CHAPTER 2
CORRUPTION AND CONTRADICTION

Othello becomes morally corrupt once he claims the position as head of Desdemona’s and his relationship that religious conduct literature asserts would lead him to solidify his faith. Although Othello proclaims, “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,” once Desdemona stops demanding Othello grant Cassio an audience and leaves the stage, he goes on to state, “But I do love thee! And when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (3.3.90-93). Through these statements, Othello asserts that if the love he has displayed towards Desdemona, one that does not show him demanding obedience and deference of her and asserting his superiority, ends, all will go awry, thus indicating that he continues to value the current state of their relationship and that “Desdemona[’s] lack […] [of] the employment of a wife, involving herself in Othello’s employment instead”\(^1\) is not a contributing factor to the downfall of their marriage.

Iago attempts to turn Othello from his position through suggesting that Cassio has made him a “cuckold” (3.3.170), and when first defending Desdemona, Othello reveals another factor of his and Desdemona’s relationship that prevents it from aligning with the patriarchal hierarchy of religious conduct literature. Religious conduct literature asserts that within the patriarchal hierarchy one need for the husband to “keepe authority” is to “procure their wiues good.” This does not mean that the husband’s authority in this matter ends if he perceives that the wife is already virtuous, for “hee must aime at her good…[through] nourishing and encreasing of

\(^1\) Cleland, 129.
whatsoeuer vertue, rooting out and weakning of whatsoeuer corruption hee shall meete with in her.”

Othello reveals that Desdemona’s and his relationship also fails to align with the patriarchal hierarchy of conduct literature in this regard through arguing that Desdemona is perfection and her virtue exceeds his own, in response to Iago’s suggestiveness: “Where virtue is [within Desdemona], these are more virtuous. / Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw / The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt, / For she had eyes and chose me” (3.3.189-191). Othello looks at Desdemona as the picture of perfection and therefore does not initially believe her capable of the sinful deceit and sexual deviance that Iago implies she is guilty of. Furthermore, he places himself beneath Desdemona through characterizing his own virtue as “weak” in comparison to hers and asserts that even his inferiority would not lead her to go against him, for she knowingly chose him despite his weakness. Through not believing that Desdemona is capable of sin because of her impenetrable virtue, and that his own virtue is weak in comparison, Othello indicates that he has not kept his authority through continuing to nourish Desdemona’s virtue or see the need to root out any possible corruption within her, because he does not view himself as maintaining a position of superior morality, which according to conduct literature, arises from the husband acting “in the Lords stead, bearing his image, and in that respect, hauing a fellowship and partnership with the Lord,”

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\text{Gouge, 29.}\]
Iago goes on to assert that Othello’s view of Desdemona as maintaining impenetrable virtue is flawed and effectively disproves his belief that she is not capable of corruption through pointing out the fact that she has previously exhibited sinful deceit. Iago prompts Othello to rethink his view of Desdemona’s behavior through making a connection between her deception toward her father regarding her marriage and hypothetical scenario of marital infidelity: “She did deceive her father, marrying you, // She that so young could give out such a seeming / He thought ‘twas witchcraft” (3.3.209-216). Although Iago references Brabantio’s earlier claim that Desdemona sinned because she fell victim to Othello’s witchcraft, Othello does not address this connection to himself, and instead focuses on its underlying claim of Desdemona’s deceitfulness. Othello reveals that this is what begins to disrupt his belief of Desdemona as incapable of sin (and thereby his moral superior) when he tells Iago that “I do not think but Desdemona’s honest” but goes on to ponder, “And yet how nature, erring from itself” (3.3.229, 231). Othello’s use of “And yet” signifies that he has begun to doubt that Desdemona is incapable of committing the sinful act of sexual deceit suggested by Iago, whose rhetoric provides possible reason as to why she may have committed this act: she desires a man of her own racial nature. Through voicing for the first time a belief that Desdemona is capable of sin, Othello’s mindset begins to reflect that of conduct literature, as it bases the need for a patriarchal hierarchy, in which the husband’s moral superiority enables him to place demands on the wife that allow him to cultivate her virtue and root out any sin, partly on this factor. Othello’s turn against Desdemona begins with this premise and thereby qualifies Ania Loomba’s assertion that such a belief begins Othello’s move away from “existing on the terms of white Venetian society, and trying to internalize its
ideology,” as his contemplation of the same concepts that Christian conduct literature relies on shows him moving closer to the Venetian subject position of Brabantio that Iago mentioned, rather than farther from it.

Through proclaiming, “O curse of marriage / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!,” (3.3.272-273) Othello marks the dramatic shift in his view of Desdemona’s and his marriage. Desdemona is no longer his “warrior”; she is now a “delicate creature” who, he asserts, belongs to him. In viewing Desdemona as a possession, Othello conveys that he now regards himself in a position of superiority over her and in effect inhabits the position of head that conduct literature calls on Christian husbands to inhabit. His claim regarding Desdemona’s sexual appetite solidifies his belief that she is capable of the act of sinful adultery. This furthers his shift to a patriarchal hierarchy, as it reveals that he is now placing himself in a position of superior morality through conveying that in his mind Desdemona no longer maintains impenetrable virtue that makes his own look weak in comparison. Instead, she becomes for him a dehumanized “creature” who lacks control and is set apart from the superior male “we” (3.3.273). Othello continues speaking of Desdemona in possessive terms as a “thing… / For other’s uses” (3.3.277-278). Neely touches on Othello’s belief in male stereotypical “values and attitudes” of women, but these tenets articulated by him for the first time here merit a more precise connection to the premises of conduct literature with an emphasis on their religious origin. When Othello viewed Desdemona as a partner of strength and superior

4 48.
5 148.
virtue, he did not suspect any vice and exhibited the happiness that conduct literature asserts will only come from a patriarchal hierarchy. Now, enacting the role as head of a patriarchal hierarchy, Othello thinks of himself suddenly as Desdemona’s superior. He now believes, to borrow Whately’s language, that he “must keepe his authority, and maintaine himselfe in that place, wherein his Maker hath set him.”\(^6\) While characterizing Desdemona and himself in these ways, Othello marks himself as cursed. His marital confidence and bliss earlier in this scene have turned to suspicion and misery.

Iago reveals earlier in the play that his plan to convince Othello to turn from Desdemona involves Othello recognizing Desdemona as sinfully deviant and fulfilling the temperamental stereotypes that Iago attributes to Moors. Iago tells Rodrigo that “Moors are changeable in their wills” (1.3.347). He goes on to assert, in soliloquy, that he can easily change Othello’s view of Desdemona, which indicates further belief in Othello’s changeability, through alluding to a relationship between Cassio and Desdemona, for “[Cassio] hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected, framed to make women false” (1.3.396-397). This indicates that his plan is dependent on Othello believing that Desdemona is capable of adultery. Iago attempts to fulfill his plan when placing Desdemona’s character in question through asserting that she has shown herself capable of deceit, to which Othello agrees quickly, in spite of his own language shortly beforehand, fulfilling the first part of Iago’s plan. However, Othello does not instantly exhibit the uncontrollable emotion that Iago sees as leading to his downfall. Therefore, Iago continues to assert that there is grounds for Desdemona to commit adultery, agreeing with Othello’s

\(^6\) Whately, 19-20.
recognition of Desdemona’s “nature, erring from itself” through his reply that “Ay, there’s the point: / Of her own clime, complexion and degree, / Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends” (3.3.231-235). Iago attempts to further drive Othello to believe that Desdemona has committed adultery through asserting that she must desire a man of her nature. Although these references to Desdemona’s deviance lead Othello to turn from his current view of Desdemona as honest, they do not do so through the uncontrollable emotion that Iago attributes to Moors but as a result of Othello moving towards the religious idea of a patriarchal hierarchy within marriage, through his recognition of Desdemona as a morally inferior possession.

Numerous critics regard Iago’s actions as provoking Othello’s corruption and regard Othello’s fall from virtue as reinforcing racial fears, but Othello’s shift in perception of gender roles within his own marriage constitutes the chief line of reasoning he voices for his turn and its disassociation from Iago’s original plan. Daniel Vitkus asserts that “Iago brings on the ‘conversion’ of Othello…Othello’s alleged propensity for religious instability is, at the same time, a libidinal weakness like that attributed to the Islamic convert.”7 Dennis Austin Britton reaffirms Vitkus’ position, stating that Iago “re-‘turn[s]’ Othello to what is presumably his prior Muslim identity.”8 Loren Cressler also places responsibility for the violent actions that Othello commits on Iago’s shoulders, arguing that he “drives all the play’s action.”9 Although Eileen


Abrahams asserts that “[t]he central conflict in Othello is between husbands and wives,” she also affirms that conflict is enacted “[o]nce Othello has allowed the thought of jealousy to darken his imagination” as a result of Iago’s suggestiveness. Iago does suggest infidelity on Desdemona’s part, together with comments regarding Othello’s race. However, it is Othello, not Iago, who sees Desdemona’s deviance as justification for a patriarchal hierarchy that places him in position of superiority over Desdemona, and it is his fulfillment of this position that ultimately drives both him and his beloved wife into tragedy. Othello takes Iago’s bait but imposes upon himself the mental shift that results in his corruption. It is when he attempts to fulfill a role reflective of the controlling Christian husband that he becomes corrupt.

The lack of patriarchal elements in the Moor’s turn within Cinthio’s “The Moor of Venice” further emphasizes that Othello includes these elements to attribute Othello’s corruption to a patriarchal hierarchy reflective of the hierarchy that religious conduct literature calls for in marriage. The first allusion that the Ensign in Cinthio’s tale makes to a relationship between the Corporal, Cassio, and Disdemona is that “[p]erhaps Disdemona has good cause to look on him so favorably’” (244). The Moor, after witnessing Disdemona’s attempt to convince him to reconcile with the Corporal, goes on to enquire about this factor and is given indication of what this “cause” is. Rather than prove that Disdemona is capable of sin in an attempt to bring the Moor to believe this, the Ensign blames Disdemona’s act of infidelity on her dissatisfaction with the Moor’s nature: “[t]he woman has come to dislike your blackness’” (245). The Ensign’s line of corruption differs from Iago’s, as he only drives the Moor to recognize issues with his own

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person resulting from his race. So does the Moor’s belief in it. In *Othello*, Othello’s corruption lies in his inhabiting a position of superiority in his marriage reflective of English Renaissance husband. In Cinthio’s “Moor of Venice,” by contrast, the Moor believes the Ensign’s reasoning, as his “words struck the Moor’s heart to its core,” and he only questions him “in order to learn more” (245). He does not enact his corruption through fulfilling his position as head within a patriarchal hierarchy. Shakespeare’s alteration of Cinthio’s story underlines that Othello’s move to the position of patriarchal husband is what leads to his corruption.

It is only after Othello begins enacting self-consciously the position of head of a patriarchal hierarchy within his marriage that his transition from Christian to heathen husband commences. The first indications of this corruption are given when he calls, “Arise, black vengeance from the hollow hell” (3.3.450) and proclaims, “Damn her [Desdemona], lewd minx: O damn her, damn her! // …[f]urnish me with some means of death / For the fair devil” (3.3 475-478). Here Othello continues in a position of superiority over Desdemona that depends on a newfound belief in her corruptibility and effective inferiority. Conduct literature calls on husbands to draw on their superior morality within the patriarchal hierarchy to “reproue & admonish” the wife for any sinful behavior she exhibit “in word only.” Therefore, the conceptual violence Othello voices is not justified by religious conduct literature, which regards the actions Othello mentions as sinful. However, these vicious thoughts only occur once Othello adopts for himself the position of head within a patriarchal hierarchy reflective of that of conduct

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11 Perkins, 128.
literature and turns away from a relationship that does not align with this hierarchy, in which he never tended toward violent thoughts.

Othello does not commit violent acts until he further asserts the position of patriarchal husband through demanding that Desdemona obey him. He shows that he believes Desdemona is now his inferior to command, when he calls for her to obey him through repeatedly demanding that she “Fetch [him] the handkerchief” (3.4.91). Sara Munson Deats asserts that Othello “accept[s] a very different concept of the married state [that] stress[es] the absolute domination of the patriarchy in the family” than what is relayed in Puritan conduct literature, which she interprets as “empathetically” limiting the husband’s power, arguing that there is no difference between this point and when he shows himself exerting a patriarchal “right to kill [Desdemona].”  

 Although this scene does not end with a reaffirmation of the couple’s relationship as not aligning with a patriarchal hierarchy but with Othello storming off as a result of Desdemona’s refusal to obey his demand for the handkerchief or provide an explanation for where it is, he has not yet resorted to the violence that conduct literature disparages. As Perkins puts it, a husband should feel empowered to make demands rightfully his to claim: “reproue & admonish her in word only, if he seeth her in fault…[and] not chastise her either with stripes, or stroks.”  

At this point Othello does not yet inhabit a position in his marriage that differs from the one conduct literature outlines and does not exhibit what Deats calls “absolute patriarchal

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13 Perkins, 128.
dominance”\textsuperscript{14} that holds no bounds against violence. Shakespeare’s play shows that even an ‘empathetical’ form of patriarchal hierarchy holds the capability to corrupt.

Desdemona notes that Othello’s behavior marks a drastic change in how he has acted towards her thus far in their relationship and provides further proof of its patriarchal nature. Following Othello’s request for her handkerchief, Desdemona proclaims, “My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him / Were he in favour as in humor altered,” (3.4.125-126) thereby identifying a change in his behavior. As Desdemona continues to voice this observation, she ties the change in his behavior directly to his preventing her freedom of speech: “[I] stood within the blank of his displeasure / For my free speech” (3.4.129-130). This adds further dimension to Othello’s fulfillment of the role of patriarchal husband. According to Desdemona’s perspective, his role in the patriarchal hierarchy now extends to the need for deference that conduct literature’s outline of a reflective hierarchy justifies, for he exhibits displeasure for the lack of deference she shows: speaking out of turn. In previous scenes, by contrast, he had accepted her urgent advocacy for Cassio’s suit to regain access to Othello, which could have been interpreted as overly assertive language by a wife lacking due deference to her husband.

Through believing that Desdemona is a morally inferior possession, Othello begins to think of and treat Desdemona in a manner that conduct literature deems acceptable; however, following his shift in mentality, Othello exhibits violent thoughts that he connects to hell and that eventually become sinfully violent actions over Desdemona that go against conduct literature and drive him to become fully corrupt, thereby marking this hierarchy as capable of paradoxically

\textsuperscript{14} Deats, 248.
affecting those who follow it. After hearing Desdemona speak out of turn about Cassio to Lodovico and seemingly admit her love for him, Othello is shown “Striking her” (4.1.241sd). Lodovico disparages Othello’s action, emphasizing that it marks a sign of moral corruption through casting Othello’s virtue in doubt:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient? This the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce? (4.1.264-268)

With this physical violence against Desdemona, Othello displays corrupt behavior that conduct literature classifies as “the greatest shame that can be, not so much to her that is beaten, as to him that doeth the deed…[through which] thou dost much derogate and decay the excellency and virtue of thine own authority.” Lodovico’s lines complement that emphasis from the official English homily on marriage through asserting that Othello’s physical violence toward his wife marks an unambiguous falling away from the Christian position of virtue that Othello previously maintained publicly and politically when exhibiting rational control that prevented him from giving into impassioned anger. Through asserting that this sinful behavior marks a change in Othello’s character, Lodovico also voices what the audience has seen: it is only after embracing his role as husband in a patriarchal hierarchy reflective of conduct literature that Othello exhibits spiritual “blindness,” not throughout the play as Maurianne Adams maintains.

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15 “Homily of the State of Matrimony,” 474.

Although Desdemona earlier reveals that she recognizes a change in Othello’s behavior, she begins to meet Othello’s authority with the same level of obedience that the patriarchal hierarchy of conduct literature calls on wives to maintain in the aforementioned scene. At first, Desdemona appears to display the behavior she has displayed towards Othello thus far. She exhibits openness of speech and thereby disregard for deference when she tells Lodovico, “Cousin, there’s fallen between him and my lord / An unkind breach” (4.1.224-225). However, there is a notable change in her behavior toward Othello even before he strikes her: she is now referring to Othello continuously as “My Lord” (4.1.227-239), effectively fulfilling the duty the biblical women set out who “called their husbands lords, and shewed them reverence in obeying them.”17 Therefore, she displays behavior that indicates a move towards the role of obedient wife within a patriarchal hierarchy, but not complete fulfilment at this point. She further reveals that she does not yet fully inhabit the position of obedient wife through stating, “I have not deserved this” (4.1.240), after Othello strikes her. Desdemona only fully fulfills her role within the patriarchal hierarchy once Othello asserts that her current sorrowful behavior is an act of sinful deceit: “If that the earth could teem with woman’s tears / Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile” (4.1.244-245). After Othello makes this connection, Desdemona no longer exhibits disobedience; she answers his demand for her to get “Out of my sight!” with “I will not stay to offend you” (4.1.246-247). This demonstrates that Desdemona does not make a change in her behavior until Othello reveals to her that he now believes she is capable of the sinful deceit that her father warned him of, and effectively, is not willing to make a change in her behavior

without justification from her husband. When Othello calls Desdemona back, she comes and obediently answers his call, through deferentially asking, “My lord?” (4.1.250). Even when Othello goes on to disparage her and asserts sarcastically, “she’s obedient” (4.1.255), mocking what he thinks to be a false posture she displays while secretly committing adultery with Cassio, she now remains obedient through not addressing his disparagement and thereby maintaining the deference she did not previously display.

The continuation of Desdemona’s obedience and deference when Othello later calls her forth to question her on what he believes are her “villainous secrets” (4.2.22) underlines her commitment to her newfound position within the patriarchal hierarchy. This is the first scene between Desdemona and Othello after he is shown striking her, and despite the violence she has endured, Desdemona remains obedient towards Othello in an attempt to please him. She first asks Othello, “My lord, what is your will?,” then “What is your pleasure?,” and ends her entrance with an ultimate picture of subjection: “Upon [her] knees” (4.2.22-32) in front of him. Throughout the scene Desdemona continues to refer to Othello as “My lord” and remains deferential, only speaking when asked a question. The scene ends with Desdemona providing reasoning as to why a wife must remain obedient to her husband through regarding him as head, “lord,” and exhibiting deference through not displaying sexual deviousness, as she informs Othello, “I am a Christian. / If to preserve this vessel for my lord / From any hated foul unlawful touch / Be not strumpet I am none” (4.2.84-87). She references her position in relation to the husband: he is her lord, and according to conduct literature, it is her duty as Christian wife to ensure she treats him as such through obeying his demands and exhibiting deference. She relies on this concept in an attempt to convince him of her faithfulness, which in addition to her
obedient behavior, shows that she now inhabits a mindset reflective of religious conduct literature, and thereby relays that their relationship aligns with the patriarchal hierarchy this literature outlines.

Although Disdemona’s reaction to the Moor’s change in behavior in Cinthio’s story reflects Desdemona’s, it shows her maintaining the obedience that she has maintained since the tale’s opening, thereby signifying that she undergoes no change from the position of obedient wife within a patriarchal hierarchy. The pleas that Cinthio’s Disdemona makes to the Moor to see the Corporal are not filled with the freedom of speech that Desdemona displays; instead, Disdemona approaches him “begging.” The manner in which she forms her request to the Moor reflects her approach: “I should not like you to be angry with me. Nothing else makes me do it but sorrow to see you deprived of so dear a friend…But you Moors are so hot by nature, that any little thing moves you to anger and revenge.” Cinthio’s Disdemona is simpering in her attempt to not anger the Moor, fulfilling the role of deferent wife. Although she references the Moor’s “hot nature,” her assertion that she is not attempting to anger him and the tale’s characterization of her approach as one of “courtesy and modesty” indicate that this is said not in an attempt to anger and insult him, which would show her failing to fulfill the position of deferent wife of obedience, but that she states this in a matter-of-fact manner. Disdemona, seeing that she has angered him unintentionally, does not exhibit disobedience as Desdemona does of Othello when he requests the handkerchief in the play’s reflective scene, and she refuses to answer his request to produce it or explain why it is missing. Rather, she attempts to clearly indicate that she meant no offense or attempt to deviate from a position of deferent obedience. Disdemona’s reply to the
Moor’s anger continues to show her fulfilling the position of “a wife who should be obedient,”\(^{18}\) saying “humbly, ‘Only a very good purpose made me speak to you about this, but rather than have you angry with me, I shall never say another word on the subject’” (245). In this matter, Disdemona continues to demonstrate unwavering obedience, in direct contrast to Desdemona, who throughout her first entreaty to Othello to see Cassio and during his call on her to produce the handkerchief, shows that she is not deferent or obedient through exhibiting freedom of speech and refusing to answer Othello’s demands. Altering the character of Desdemona to show that she only reaches this point when responding to Othello’s fulfillment of the position of head with her own fulfillment of the position of obedient wife enables Othello to present Desdemona’s moral corruption as occurring after she inhabits the patriarchal hierarchy that Disdemona inhabits throughout the entirety of her tale.

Desdemona’s fulfillment of her marital role within a patriarchal hierarchy reflective of that outlined by religious conduct literature leads to her moral corruption through causing her faith to dissipate, in further demonstration of the paradoxical effect that patriarchal hierarchy is capable of producing. Desdemona’s and Emilia’s contemplation of Othello’s call to “Get you to bed / On th’instant, I will be returned forwith / Dismiss your attendant there: look’t be done” (4.3.5-7) exposes the paradoxical corruption that goes in tandem with the obedience she exhibits to meet his position of authority, as it is such obedience that conduct literature asserts will lead to religiosity. Desdemona tells Emilia, “[he] hath commanded me to go to bed” (4.3.11), and when Emilia questions this command, Desdemona’s reply reveals her blind obedience: “It was his

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\(^{18}\) Holmer, 138.
bidding: therefore, good Emilia, / Give me nightly wearing, and adieu / We must not displease him” (4.3.13-15). Despite Emilia expressing anger towards Othello, replying “Would you had never seen him,” (4.3.16) Desdemona continues to defend and support Othello and gives indication of her corruption: “So would not I: my love doth so approve him / That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns /…have grace and favour” (4.3.17-19). Although Othello has exhibited sinful violence towards Desdemona, she continues to defend and regard him favorably. She also speaks of him devotionally, asserting that she wants to win his grace and favor. Through asserting that she is continuing to strive for Othello’s grace and favor despite the sinful behavior he has shown, she provides the first indication that the obedience to Othello she maintains to answer his demands as husband has produced a level of devotion within her that leads to a dissipation of faith. Religious conduct literature asserts that Othello’s sinful violence “discharge[s] her any longer to dwell with such an husband, as unworthy to have any further company with her, that doth smite her,”19 as “the Scriptures” convey the husband “may reproue & admonish her in word.”20 However, Desdemona continues to show Othello obedience, and although she initially denounces Othello’s violence, “I have not deserved this” (4.1.240), she does not make any further denouncements and speaks of him lovingly while defending his anger toward her. As a result, Desdemona’s decision to remain with Othello and obey his demands leads to “a self-proclaimed suicide” that is not honorable21 but devastatingly corrupting, for

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19 “Homily on the State of Matrimony,” 479.
20 Perkins, 127.
21 Holmer, 157.
although it does not show her committing sin herself, unlike Othello, it shows a disregard for Scripture that privileges devotion to faith over devotion to husband.

The parallel conversation that occurs between Disdemona and the Ensign’s wife in “The Moor of Venice” further emphasizes that the tale aligns the Moor’s corruption with race and that Othello’s alterations align the corruption of both Desdemona and Othello with a patriarchal hierarchy. Cinthio’s Disdemona tells the Ensign’s wife that “[h]e used to be all love toward me, but in these few days he has become quite another man; and I fear greatly that I shall prove a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents’ wishes; Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate us” (248). Disdemona attributes the Moor’s change in his treatment towards her to his inherent nature as a heathenistic Moor through asserting that their relationship and the consequences his actions enact provide proof that Moors and Christians should not be together. The first reference made to religion further shows that dedication to Christianity cannot be associated with the Moor’s turn, unlike Othello’s, for as Moor by birth, Disdemona indicates he can make no claim to be a disciple of the Christian heaven. Disdemona remains obedient throughout the tale and asserts that the Moor’s inherent nature is what leads to his lack of kindness towards her and his resulting act of murder. Her characterization of the Moor’s turn, as well as the Moor’s own response to the Ensign’s reference to his race and his ultimate fulfillment of the stereotype Disdemona outlines regarding Moorish anger, demonstrate that the tale’s villain is inherent Moorish nature. By contrast, in Othello, the Christian Desdemona and Othello both are driven to moral corruption, Othello through committing sinful acts and Desdemona through accepting
these sinful acts despite their discord with Christian Scripture and church teaching (such as the official homily on marriage), once they fulfil their positions within a patriarchal hierarchy.
CHAPTER 3

REVELATION

Othello and Desdemona’s corruption culminates through Desdemona’s murder. The ruminations that Othello makes prior to murdering Desdemona reinforce the paradoxically corrupting effect that patriarchal hierarchy has had over his mentality. In this scene’s opening, Othello alludes to his corruption, stating upon entering Desdemona’s room and looking at her sleeping form, “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!” (5.2.1). Although at this time Othello does not realize that he is corrupt, he makes a connection between Desdemona’s believed act of sin and his position within the patriarchal hierarchy as one of superior morality whose responsibility it is to “root[...] out and weakn[...] of whatsoeuer corruption hee shall meete with in her”¹: “she must die, else she’ll betray more men. / Put out the light, and then put out the light!” (5.2.5-6). He makes reference to his need to prevent Desdemona from committing acts of carnal sin, as his reasoning for putting out the light of her life. Othello reveals here that it is not emotive “jealousy [that] serves [his] requirements”² or a desire to protect his own “reputation,”³ but a dedication to the idea that a patriarchal hierarchy enables the husband to root out any corruption within his wife.

¹ Whately, 23.
³ Neely, 144.
Othello asserts his right to kill Desdemona through tying it directly to his position as husband. Othello asserts that he was justified, as “Cassio did top her…/ O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell / But that I did proceed upon just grounds / To this extremity” (5.2.134-137). The role of head that conduct literature calls on the husband to fulfill does not justify the husband exhibiting violence towards one’s wife, but it does outline his position as one of superior morality that enables him to prevent her from sinning. Through the justification that Othello provides for his actions, here in monologue, he demonstrates that his fulfillment of the position of head within a patriarchal hierarchy has driven him to become paradoxically corrupted to the point where he holds no bounds even against sin.

Prior to murdering her, Othello continuously calls on Desdemona to confess her sins, and when telling her to “Think on thy sins,” she gives confirmation that she believes that she has done wrong through responding that “They are loves I bear to you” (5.2.134-137). As discussed in the prior chapter, Desdemona reveals that her devotion to Othello surpasses her devotion to the tenets of Christian faith that mark the violence he exhibits as sinful. Therefore, she does not commit the sinful act of adultery as Othello believes but does wrong through remaining with him and refusing to further denounce his sinful behavior because the love she bears for Othello pushed her into a “subservient role”\(^4\) of obedient wife to meet his position as head. Although Desdemona states “A guiltless death I die,” she indicates that this is not said with the purpose of tasking Emilia with “the responsibility of clearing her name” through completely absolving

\(^4\) Deats, 248.
Desdemona of all guilt,⁵ for when Emilia asks Desdemona directly, “O who hath done / This deed?,” Desdemona responds, “Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord—O, farewell” (5.2.120-125). Desdemona’s response relays that she does not blame Othello for what has happened, nor does she wish for anyone else to do so. It is Desdemona’s ultimate obedience to Othello, which drives her to do anything to win his “grace and favor,” that leads her to be in a position that enables Othello to murder her, effectively indicating why she marks herself as responsible. While she informs Othello that she is guiltless, she must be speaking in regard to what he is accusing her of, as she has already claimed that she is guilty of wrongdoing and there is only one wrong that she is guilty of: allowing her devotion to Othello to drive her away from Christian Scripture which denounces Othello’s actions. It is Desdemona’s ultimate obedience to Othello that produces unwavering devotion within her to the point that it surpasses the level that conduct literature calls for. However, like Othello her obedience only reaches this destructive level after she makes a turn to the position of wifely obedience that she fulfills to answer Othello’s position as head, in further display of this patriarchal hierarchy’s paradoxically corrupting effect.

Cinthio’s “The Moor of Venice” affirms Desdemona’s virtue through ending with indication of her Christian faith, thereby showing that she has not undergone moral corruption, in contrast to Desdemona whose faith dissipates with her death, and that the Moor who stands on the opposite end of divine justice is heathenistic. After hearing the Moor inform her of why he is killing her, Desdemona “called on Divine Justice to witness her fidelity, since earthly justice

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failed” (251). Disdemona’s call for justice shows that the devotion Desdemona exhibits towards Othello, which culminates through her death, is absent, as Disdemona wants the Moor to be punished. Through presenting Desdemona as undergoing corruption as a result of her fulfillment of the role of obedient wife within a patriarchal hierarchy, Othello emphasizes that the play’s message does not focus primarily on racial nature, as both white Venetian and Moor undergo corruption due to taking up the Christian marital roles tied to this hierarchy.

The Moor’s reason for murdering Disdemona in “The Moor of Venice” also differs from Othello’s to further show that the Moor’s inherent nature is that tale’s villain. The Moor’s anger over Desdemona’s advocacy for the Corporal causes him to claim that “[a]nyone who does not believe that [as a Moor, he is temperamental] may easily have proof of it! I shall take such revenge for any wrongs done to me as will more than satisfy me’” (245). His justification for killing Desdemona greatly differs from Othello’s, as he shows that it is purely his anger over her believed act of unfaithfulness and need to enact revenge that drives him to murder her, as he emphasizes through his repetitive use of “me.” Therefore, though he claims that doing so is what makes him a man, “I couldn’t think myself a man if I didn’t rid the world of such a wicked creature,’” (250) his earlier assertion that it is his fulfilment of the position as Moor that drives this act of revenge shows himself not fulfilling the role of a good Christian husband but appealing to a Moorish sense of manhood he has outlined. In contrast, Othello reveals that it is his belief in patriarchal concepts of women’s inferior morality that initiates his turn and drives him to murder Desdemona.

The plan that the Ensign and Moor make to kill Disdemona further distances Othello from its source. The Ensign and the Moor plan to kill Disdemona by “beat[ing] Disdemona with
a stocking filled with sand until she dies,” and it is said that “[t]he cruel plan pleased the Moor” (250). They plan for a violent and long death that the tale classifies as cruel and asserts that such cruelty pleases the Moor. Othello, by contrast, shows that joy does not consistently fuel Othello’s act of killing Desdemona, as he “weep” at the thought of murdering Desdemona and reveals that he wishes for it to be as painless as possible: “What noise is this? Not dead? not yet quite dead? / I that am cruel yet merciful, / I would not have thee linger in thy pain” (5.2.20, 85-87). The pain that Othello feels over the thought of murdering Desdemona indicates, once again, that Othello is not guided by an inherent nature that prevents him from controlling his anger, unlike the Moor of Venice whose lack of regard for Desdemona and desire for long, drawn-out revenge marks him as the tale’s villain.

The scene of Desdemona’s murder in Cinthio’s story also conveys that it is not only the Moor individually who is the tale’s villain but his race, for he demonstrates when murdering Desdemona that he represents the epitome of beliefs regarding Moors. While the Ensign is beating Desdemona, the Moor tells her, “‘[y]ou wicked woman, you are having the reward of your infidelity. This is how women are treated who, pretending to love their husbands, put horns on their heads’” (251). This conveys what has driven the Moor to see to her murder: his own anger over Desdemona cuckolding him and unrestricted desire for revenge. Unlike Othello, he does not justify his murder of Desdemona as an attempt to prevent her from enacting more sin through exhibiting continued deceitfulness and sexual lasciviousness and show himself taking up the position as her morally superior head, but rather a selfish need for revenge over what she has done to him. Therefore, unlike Othello, the Moor makes no “attempts to rationalize and sanctify
his bloody deed in the name of religion,”⁶ and instead is guided by the anger that Desdemona earlier exposes as a stereotype connected to Moors’ inability to control their emotions.

After Othello murders Desdemona, he affirms that the violent actions he has taken have corrupted him as a result of him fulfilling his role as head of a patriarchal hierarchy, indicating further the paradoxical corrupting effect of the hierarchy conduct literature calls on Christians to establish within marriage. Othello asserts that it was a change in himself that caused the disruption of Desdemona’s and his relationship and led to his corruption, when he states his story is “Of one not easily jealous but being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand, / Like the base Indian, threw the pearl away / Richer than all his tribe” (5.2.342-346). Othello affirms that prior to his corruption, he was not of a jealous nature, but that an extreme factor, Iago’s assertions of Desdemona’s sinfulness and his subsequent belief in it, had brought on such possessiveness. When Othello and Desdemona maintain a relationship that does not abide by a patriarchal hierarchy, he does not display possessive jealousy, even when she is extreme in her advocacy for Cassio. It is only once he begins to believe in Desdemona’s deceitfulness and sexual deviance that Othello begins to exhibit jealous feelings that lead him to assert his superiority and the possessiveness it grants him in alignment with a patriarchal hierarchy. It is his fulfillment of this position that drives him to exhibit violent thoughts that spark eventual actions and mark this hierarchy as the perplexing extreme that ultimately causes Othello to throw away the pearly white purity of his marriage, Desdemona’s life, and his soul.

⁶ Vitkus, 98.
Othello further characterizes his actions as sinful and marks them as signifying a turn from his position of Christianity through alluding significantly to a past battlefield experience where he saw “a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian” (5.2.351-352). Through making reference to a Turk beating a Venetian when relaying his story, Othello draws attentions to the fact that his actions have shown heathenistic influences conquering his Christianity. Othello’s Christianity was conquered by the heathen that he became as a result of fulfilling his position as husband within a patriarchal hierarchy. Despite his corruption, the play ends with Othello attempting to return to a state of Christianity through him committing suicide, an action that he compares further to the allusion he has made of a prior instance of him taking “by th’throat the circumcised dog [turbaned Turk] / And sm[iting] him—thus!” (5.2.353-354). Loomba asserts that through this act Othello solidifies his move to “total outsider.” Britton reads this action in a similar manner, asserting that it shows a “reversion to Islam” and an effective success for Iago, whose goal is to revert Othello’s Baptism. Vitkus introduced the turning-Turk argument, asserting that Othello’s suicide “confirms his identity as infidel.” This act of suicide is sinful, yet Othello has already asserted that he wants to be sent to hell for what he has done. Therefore, through his suicide, Othello shows that he is attempting to assert Christian faith in a tragically twisted manner, trying to ensure that he be punished eternally for his sin and prevent any further worldly sin. Thus, Othello should not be classified as a heathenistic Turkish outsider.

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7 Loomba, 48.
8 Britton, 44.
9 Vitkus, 104.
Instead, we can redirect Patricia Parker’s claim that Othello’s suicide finalizes his “self-division of both outsider and insider”\textsuperscript{10} and David Scott Kastan’s view that it shows him attempting to once again be a “defender of Venice and the Christian West…[but that] he cannot be fully naturalized” as a Christian himself.\textsuperscript{11} Although Othello recognizes that his change of marital position led him to sin and that such behavior should not go unpunished, he is unable to return to the state of Christianity that he maintained prior to his corruption when prescribing to the most basic tenets of the baptism, to maintain faith in God and reject the devil, for he denounces the devil and sin but does not maintain faith in God’s omnipotence, because he does not allow God, whose power it is “to execute wrath upon him that doth evil,”\textsuperscript{12} to execute his punishment.

Othello’s warped sense of Christianity furthers the corruptive power of patriarchal hierarchy through tragically preventing him from returning to his previous position of virtuous Christian. His anger over the horrors it has driven him to commit and need to see satisfactory justice for them inhibit him from regaining complete faith.

“The Moor of Venice’s” ending presents the Moor as remaining in a position of villainy, unlike Othello whose tragic inability to return to a position of Christian virtue prompts audiences to look on him as a victim and regard patriarchal hierarchy as the play’s villain that prevents him from returning to this state. After Disdemona is killed, Cinthio’s tale reveals that God answers her pleas for justice:


\textsuperscript{12} Book of Common Prayer, 287.
God, the just observer of men’s hearts, did not intend such vile wickedness to go without proper punishment. He ordained that the Moor…on finding himself deprived of her [Disdemona] should feel such longing that he went about like one besides himself…Realizing now that the Ensign was the cause of his losing his lady…he held the villain in such abhorrence…and if he had not been afraid of the inviolable Venetian lords, he would have slain him openly. (251)

In contrast to Othello—who shows that he maintains a semblance of Christianity, albeit warped, when he asserts that he should be sent to hell for sinning, calling “Whip me, ye devils, /Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down guld of liquid fire!” (5.2.275-278), and when he finds this not occurring, ensuring that he is sent to hell—the Moor continues to remain in complete opposition to heaven. He also displays selfishness through caring more for his safety then avenging Disdemona and is unable to fully admit to himself the part he played in her murder. The Moor’s reaction once he is caught further depicts him in a villainous light. Although the Moor is tortured to confess, “he denied everything so fully that nothing could be extorted from him. By his constancy he escaped death initially; however, after many days in prison…in which he was finally slain by Disdemona’s relatives, as he richly deserved” (252). The Moor continues to show that he cares more about his own life than any semblance of justice for Disdemona. “The Moor of Venice” ends with affirmation of the Moor’s heathenistic villainy through casting him as a selfish agent against God, while Othello’s ending brings into question what it means to be a virtuous Christian husband and wife by showing that Othello and Desdemona’s downfalls are not a result of Othello’s race but their fulfillment of marital roles within a patriarchal hierarchy reflective of the structure outlined by English religious conduct literature.
CONCLUSION

Othello becomes morally corrupt as a result of fulfilling the position as head of a patriarchal hierarchy reflective of the structure that religious conduct literature calls on the husband and wife to establish within marriage. A mental shift toward viewing Desdemona as his inferior possession drives Othello to exhibit sinful thoughts and actions of violence that conduct literature condemns. Desdemona responds to Othello’s change of mentality by fulfilling the position of obedient wife. The obedience that Desdemona maintains turns into ultimate devotion that shows her obeying Othello even after he sins. The lack of disapproval Desdemona exhibits regarding Othello’s sinful behavior and continued obedience presents her as going against Scripture and thereby leads to a dissipation of Christian faith that patriarchal hierarchy enacts, as it is Othello’s claim to his position as head that drives her to inhabit the position of obedient wife within this hierarchy. When patriarchal dominance and subservience is absent from Desdemona and Othello’s relationship, they exhibit dedication to a Christian God and happiness. The juxtaposition of Othello’s and Desdemona’s behaviors before and after his soliloquy in Act Three, Scene Three, reveals that the patriarchal hierarchy within marriage is capable of producing paradoxical and tragic effects.

Contrasting Othello with its source material emphasizes that the play questions the marital structure outlined by religious conduct literature. The alterations that Othello makes to the character of Othello enable him to maintain Christian faith, while the Moor’s fulfillment of Moorish stereotypes depicts him as the villain of “The Moor of Venice” whose inherent
heathenistic nature causes tragedy. *Othello* also ascribes greater detail to and alters Desdemona and Othello’s relationship to show that it undergoes a transition once enabling a patriarchal hierarchy to overtake their relationship. Depicting Othello and Desdemona as both undergoing moral corruption as a result of patriarchal hierarchy, as opposed to solely depicting Othello as corrupt, ensures that audiences can see that this hierarchy does not corrupt Othello due to his status as racial other as it is capable of corrupting his virtuous Italian wife, too. While the warped Christianity that Othello maintains after fulfilling the position as head within a patriarchal hierarchy presents him as standing between Venetian husband and Moorish other, unlike the Moor who stands as other throughout the tale’s entirety, he maintains the pledges of Christian baptism prior to his corruption, and his transition emphasizes that it is only when he moves closer to the role of English husband that his Christian virtue is corrupted.

Through significantly altering its source material, *Othello* presents the patriarchal hierarchy that English conduct literature asserts leads to Christian virtue as a villainous force that is capable of paradoxically corrupting born Christians and converts alike. By exposing the issues inherent within the marital structure that religious conduct literature calls for, *Othello* casts doubt over the ability for this structure to promote piety and happiness within marriage.


