Courtship, Loe, and Marriage in Othello: Shakespeare's Mockery of Courtly Love

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COURTSHIP, LOVE, AND MARRIAGE IN OTHELLO: SHAKESPEARE'S
MOCKERY OF COURTLY LOVE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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December 2006
COURTSHIP, LOVE, AND MARRIAGE IN OTHELLO: SHAKESPEARE’S MOCKERY OF COURTLY LOVE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Elizabeth Thompson Oakes for her patience, guidance, and dedicated valor. Also, to my parents who have always pushed me into my dreams.

I would also like to thank Dr. James Flynn and Dr. Deborah Logan for serving on my Committee, as well as providing help and guidance in my college career.
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Othello is the forgery of a comedic play turned tragedy, for the play begins where the ordinary comedy would end. While many critics prefer to discuss the racial and exotic aspects of William Shakespeare’s tragedy, there are several critics who focus on the role of love and the marital relationships that are also important in terms of interpreting the actions of key characters. Carol Thomas Neely, Maurice Charney, and several other literary critics have focused primarily on the role of marriage and love in Othello. The topic of marriage is generally discussed in terms of the wooing scene (Act 1, scene 3) and the perverted consummation of the marriage rights (Act 5, scene 1), but there is little reflection on the courtly love rules and conventions from most critical approaches. Courtly lovers were a dying breed in Shakespeare’s time, yet he employs the use of basic courtly love principles not only in Othello, but in many of his works, particularly comedies like the Merry Wives of Windsor and As You Like It. The use of such principles allows ridicule and scorn to take place in the plays, but in Othello, courtly love introduces the themes of cuckoldry and, most importantly, women’s loss of power.

Women’s loss of power is another issue that critics often deconstruct, yet
this concept is also linked to the principles of courtly love. Within the courtly love tradition men were often submissive to women—in Chrétien de Troyes’ Lancelot and Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” men tended to bend to the will of women, often finding happiness and true love by doing so. The Moor General Othello is first presented as a submissive husband, but as the play progresses, the embarrassment of Desdemona’s presumed infidelity begins to unravel his ideas of love. Instead of following the courtly conventions of dealing with adultery, Othello transforms into the Renaissance ideal Petrarchan lover, one who seeks spiritual love over physical love and views sexuality as sinful.

The ideas and rules of courtly love contradicted the principles of the Renaissance Petrarchan lover. However, Shakespeare employed the tradition of courtly love to emphasize mockery and satire as overall themes of the play. For example, Othello and Desdemona are presented first and foremost as lovers that uphold the conventions of courtly love—they try to keep their relationship as secretive as possible and Othello appears subject to the will of his beloved. However, later in the play, instead of listening to the guidance and innocent speeches of his beloved, Othello returns to the love philosophies of antiquity. To the philosophers of classic love philosophy, love, and therefore passion, was considered sinful and untrustworthy, especially as a firm foundation for progress. Ultimately, it is Othello’s devotion to his militaristic and social images that outweighs his love for Desdemona. Yet, instead of separating from his wife, the Moor feels that the only way to win control over the lord-vassal relationship is
to murder her, or as he claims in Act 5, scene 1, to “sacrifice her.”

*Othello* depicts the ideas and rules of courtly love outlined and recorded by Andres Capellanus in *The Art of Courtly Love*. Whilst his contemporaries still dreamed of fair maidens with sparkling eyes, Shakespeare explored other methods and conventions from the Middle Ages and combined, as well as contrasted, them with the newer conventions of the Renaissance. His story is one of anti-courtly love—a story focusing on the death of chivalry, romantic courting, and Othello’s inability to love. The play detests, destroys, and mocks the ideas of courtly wooing, marriage, and fidelity. A play of power, *Othello* reflects such characteristics through a verisimilitude of circumstances, specifically seen in the wooing of Desdemona, the marriage bed of Othello and Desdemona, and the loss of women’s power in the play. Tainted with “honorable” murder, jealousy, and the *fabliau* tradition of cuckoldry, *Othello* has been preserved as Shakespeare’s great tale of love gone awry.
INTRODUCTION

Had *Othello* merely been a play focused on soldiers and war, it most likely would have followed a historical feudal pattern found in the Old English verses of *Beowulf*. Such as it is, *Othello* is caught in the cross fire of transformation from Middle English traditions to those conventions and principles outlined in the Renaissance. The worlds of literacy, art, technology, and exploration were turned on their ears during the flourishing “rebirth” of classical ideologies and the growing British empire. What had taken nearly one thousand years to evolve in language, science, and art was quickly being challenged. The gates of the world were opened to a reconnection with the past, but likewise forged to a connection to the future.

During its time, courtly love was a revolutionary set of ideas that quickly spread among the aristocracy of Southern France into the realm of Britain and other European powers. In his work *The Art of Courtly Love* Andreas Capellanus provides a written account of how the southern French Troubadour ideas of courtly love began to form during the twelfth century, and the “rules” which outlined who may love, how one may love, and in what conditions love may exist. In his introduction, editor Frederick W. Locke states:

> Without Courtly Love, the tragic passionate love of the modern novel and theatre would be difficult to explain. Courtly Love has influenced men’s deepest attitude toward the other sex, our unquestioned sense of courtesy in the West, our persistent, if
socially crystallized, deference toward women. Courtly love is also responsible for the “democratization” of relations between man and woman, inasmuch as not social position but intrinsic worth determined the mutual acceptability of the partners according to the courtly code. (vi)

Exclusively in the realm of the aristocracy, this new concept of love flourished and replaced the ideals of Greek and Roman love philosophies—such as those of Aristotle, Theophrastus, and even Ovid. Passionate love moved from a form of chastisement, as seen in the literature of Antiquity, into a revolutionary concept involving obedience, honesty, courtesy, and subjection.

The lines of courtly love have been traced through several Provencal Troubadour verses, yet the exact origin remains unknown. Scholars have pondered the pages of Ovid’s *The Art of Love*, Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*, and even aspects of Arabic philosophy in hopes of clarifying specifically what or who might have challenged the ancient ideals of love, yet only pieces of the puzzle have unfolded. Locke writes that Capellanus “does not propose anything new, but rather codifies what was already in existence” (vii). The editor also explains that the term “courtly love,” or *amour courtois*, did not exist until 1883 when it was coined by the French medievalist Gaston Paris in hopes of specifying the break from previous forms of love philosophies in Antiquity (vi). Capellanus presents a clear definition of love as natural—“an inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex”; specifically, it can exist only between persons of the opposite sex (2-3). In addition, Capellanus
includes an important historical landmark: a detailed description of how the thirty-one Rules of Courtly Love were founded and thus introduced into the tradition of literature (a detailed description is provided in Appendix A). It is through his mockery of courtly love traditions that Shakespeare employs the principles that the Troubadours made popular. *Othello* is a quest romance of sorts; however, the journey does not end well for any of the heroes/heroines of the play.
CHAPTER I

OTHELLO AS LOVER: THE COURTING AND WOOING OF DESDEMONA

Courtly love prevails as a primary theme in the relationship of discovering and understanding motives and actions in William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Othello The Moor of Venice*. In his work *Shakespeare on Love and Lust* Maurice Charney writes that *Othello*

[...]

is the one tragedy by Shakespeare that is not about kings and princes and heads of state set in a remote time or place, but about ordinary people, who are neither exalted nor base in social position. It is a domestic tragedy, starting from the traditionally comic base of the cuckolded husband, or the husband who imagines himself a cuckold. (97)

As Othello changes from wooer and lover to military General, to scorned lover, and finally “honorable murderer,” the importance of the rules diminish from serious importance to trivial habits of falsified jealousy and pride, and the fear of being socially ridiculed. To understand how the courtly codes of conduct are mocked in the play, the evidence of their existence must first be discovered, specifically through the role of lovers. Othello is introduced to the audience first and foremost as a courtly lover—an identity that is formed off stage before the play begins. Although the audience is given only a small glimpse of Othello’s wooing of Desdemona, there is much to be discovered. The majority of the information is given in one scene: Act 1, scene 3.

Since the play opens *in media res*, the first two scenes of Act 1 introduce
what has happened off stage before the play begins, the most important piece of information being the elopement of Desdemona and Othello, which upholds one courtly principle: "When made public love rarely endures" (Capellanus 42). The relationship has survived into marriage because of its secrecy, but the publication of the elopement starts the first initial rift in the play as Brabantio feels that his daughter has been "abused," "stol'n," and "corrupted" (1.3.72), and he accuses Othello of using "some mixtures powerful o'er the blood" (1.3.122) to trick her into marriage. The lovers are both given equal opportunities to speak of their courtship and to defend the elopement to the Senators and Duke, yet their answers are not equally weighted in the conventions of courtly love.

Othello's speeches provide the most insight into the actual wooing of the courtship. First he states: "It is most true; true I have married her" (1.3.94)—a noble and open confession. Honesty is the most important characteristic to Othello—and any courtly lover; thus, he first states his innocence in the trickery Brabantio has accused him of. Quickly, though, his focus changes from his honesty to his history, a characteristic not uncommon in courtly literature. He states, "I will a round unvarnished tale deliver / Of my whole course of love [...]" (1.3.106-07) and "'Tis my breeding / That gives me this bold show of courtesy" (1.3.110-11), even though he claims to be "little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (1.3.97). Othello delivers an elaborate tale to the Duke and Senators that provides his historical background, lineage, and own unique connection with Venice. Thomas Betteridge writes, "Othello's desire to belong, to be part of Venetian society, is based upon an awareness of the precariousness of his social
identity in Venice” (147); therefore, the Moor, who is not native to Venice, must explain that he certainly has roots in Venetian history and society.

A similar introduction is found in the Arthurian legend *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While it is the poet persona who introduces the history of the Kings of Britain, specifically King Arthur, and not a specific character, the same importance of history and lineage is implied. The anonymous poet describes how Britain and the surrounding European kingdoms were formed by the Princes of Troy after the city’s siege and destruction. The main emphasis is on the history of England, essentially linking the powerful country to the powerful houses of antiquity. The poet states:

\[
\text{Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges,}
\]
\[
\text{Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as}
\]
\[
\text{Forþi an aunter in erde I attle to schawe,}
\]
\[
\text{Þat a selly in siȝt summe men hit holden,}
\]
\[
\text{And an outtrage awenture of Arthurez wonderez.}
\]
\[
\text{If þe wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile,}
\]
\[
\text{I schal telle hit as-tit, as I in toun herde,}
\]
\[
\text{with tonge,}
\]
\[
\text{As hit is stad and stoken}
\]
\[
\text{In stori stif and stronge,}
\]
\[
\text{With lel letteres loken,}
\]
\[
\text{In londe so hatz ben longe. (25-36)}
\]

(A modern English translation is located in Appendix B.) Written in the 15th
century, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, like *Othello*, centers on the importance of lineage and honor, as well as rhetorical skill. For as the poet puts it, “I schal telle hit as-tit, as I in toun herde,” so Othello also presents an oral tale to the Duke and Senate, the same tale that he has told time and time again.

The Moor plans to start from the beginning, the same place he starts every time he sups at Brabantio’s—“I ran it through, even from my boyish days / To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it” (1.3.153-54)—and is enticed to render his exotic life’s tale. However, this tale will emphasize how Othello the Moor General “won [Brabantio’s] daughter” (1.3.111), and not necessarily describe the specific acts by which he wooed her. Charney states:

> This is unlike most wooing scenes in Shakespeare’s comedies, where women take the lead or are at least equal partners (as in *Romeo and Juliet*). In *Othello*, Desdemona is represented as a passive, hero-worshipping recipient of Othello’s exotic life story. The romantic, heroic tale does not speak of love at all. It is not witty and personal, as wooing speeches tend to be in the comedies, but grave and portentous [...]. (99)

Othello’s tale is based on his desire to present something spectacular to his audience, as well as an image of pride and not love, especially since he focuses on his abilities as a lover and wooer and not on the actual wooing itself. He does not credit himself with following the codes and conventions of all lovers; rather, he focuses on *his* specific accomplishments in love, a revelation similar to his abilities on the battlefield, which in itself is something audiences only hear of and
Othello sets up his “tale” much like that of the Gawain Poet, for he begins by describing his genealogical origin in brief detail. He tells of his “being taken by the insolent foe / and sold to slavery” (1.3.159-60)—the only reference to his perceived heathen beginning; otherwise, he presents himself as a Christian knight and servant of Venice and the Duke. Quickly he adds “of my redemption thence” (1.3.160) as almost a gratitude for suffering such a horrible act as being captured and sold like a wild beast in order to be redeemed and Christianized. The speech is also filled with verses that describe his action as a “knight” of Venice: traveling “rough quarries,” “rocks,” and “hills” in order to reform the “cannibals” and “Anthropophagi” that threaten the decency of good chivalric society (1.3.161-68)—details that are reminiscent of Sir Gawain’s own journey to find the Green Knight. Finally, he states: “These things to hear / Would Desdemona seriously incline” (1.3.168-70). These tales are not told merely for satisfying the desires of Desdemona, though. Instead, it is Othello who desires to hear them; thus he uses an oral tradition as opposed to a written tradition to remind Desdemona of his feats. Alas, he uses his rhetorical skills to woo and win her affection—if not for him, then for his tales.

In Shakespearean Fantasy and Politics, Thomas Betteridge states:

Desdemona falls in love with Othello as he presents himself to her, and to himself, within a narrative of travel. [...] His escape from this site of Otherness is enacted in the narrative that he tells Desdemona and embodied in the position he holds within the
Desdemona's speech does not possess the bells and whistles of Othello's tale. Her message is but ten lines that explains, "[...] here's my / husband" (1.3.213-14)—a simple statement that she has willingly chosen the marriage. Like her mother and all women before her, Desdemona faces a "divided duty" and has left her father's house and "education" to be with her husband "the Moor [her] lord" (1.3.219). The speeches of the two lovers address two courtly rules: first, "No one should be deprived of love without the very best of reasons," and second, "No one can love unless he is impelled by the persuasion of love" (Capellanus 42). Since the Senate and Brabantio do not find fault with the marriage, Desdemona and Othello are not deprived of their love. The principle is not mocked in this particular scene, but later in the play Othello will deprive Desdemona of love. Secondly, it appears that both of the lovers are in some way compelled by the persuasion of love, regardless of whether this idea has any reasonable connotation or not. Through their acceptance of honesty, innocence, and legality in Desdemona and Othello's confessions, the Senators and Duke accept and respect the marriage and lovers, thus indicating that the Duke and Senate respect the codes and rules of courtly love.

On the topic of Capellanus, C.S. Lewis writes, "The definition of love on the first page of this work rules out at once the kind of love that is called 'Platonic.' The aim of love, for Andreas, is actual fruition [...]" (33). The lovers who uphold courtly values do not strive for spiritual or ideal beauty in love, but visible beauty. However, in the wooing scene Othello never describes
Desdemona’s features. She is neither presented as beautiful in the sense of the
courtly romantic descriptions of fair hair, grey eyes, or ruby lips, nor is she
presented in the more popular Petrarchan form of over exaggerated beauty. In the
death scene, though, Othello does reference her “whiter skin than snow” that is
“smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.1.4-5). His description places her beauty
equal to a monument or sculpture and is essentially classical and eternal.
Capellanus also lists that “No man can be bound by a double love” (42) as another
governing principle. The plot of the play focuses on Othello’s struggle to balance
his subjection to and responsibility for Desdemona with his duty as a “knight” of
Venice. In Act 1, scene 3, after the Senate has debated the marriage, Othello
takes up his responsibilities as a General and agrees to leave at once for Cyprus.
Although he provides for Desdemona, she has been, for the moment, set aside so
that he can pursue matters of the state. He even swears to the Senate that
allowing Desdemona to rendezvous with him in Cyprus will not be “to please the
palate of my appetite, / Nor to comply with the heat the young effects / In me
defunct and proper satisfaction” (1.3.297-99), but that his attention will be on his
duties. Ultimately, it is his militaristic feudal side that outweighs his love and
turns his heart from open and loving to tightened anger.

Jealousy and pride are mixed with Othello’s desire to uphold his
responsibilities to Desdemona and the feudal world. Capellanus explains, “He
who is not jealous cannot love” (42), yet he also emphasizes that “A man who is
vexed by too much passion usually does not love” (43). Jealousy, therefore, is a
natural consequence of love, and if kept under some form of control induces
passion for and service to the beloved. Excessive jealousy and passion, however, are dangerous to the nature of love because men will essentially become slaves to passionate desire instead obeying the bonds of love and servitude. Othello experiences both passion and jealousy in the play, but it is jealousy and the excess of passion that destroys his relationship with his wife. In Act 2, scene 2, Othello, who has been reunited with Desdemona in Cyprus, rejoices in his passion for his wife:

O, my fair warrior!

[...] It gives me wonder great as my content

To see you here before me. O my soul’s joy!

If after every tempest come such calms,

May the winds blow till they have wakened death,

And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas

Olympus high, and duck again as low

As hell’s from heaven! If it were now to die,

‘Twere now to be most happy, for I fear

My soul hath her content so absolute

That not another comfort like to this

Succeeds in unknown fate. (2.1.197-209)

Othello’s welcome upholds his image of a true lover and therefore he takes comfort in the passion that has aroused in his soul when he is reunited with Desdemona. He claims that she is his comfort in an unknowing world and how he
would welcome every ill fate if the ending result would lead to Desdemona. Claire McEachern explains, “As it is his propensity to love which makes him jealous, so it is his propensity to persuade others that, tragically, makes him all too persuadable himself” (192). His comfort, passion, and confidence in his wife will not last long, for in Act 3, scene 3, the audience is given a glimpse of Othello’s overly-jealous and heavily vexed heart. To Iago he declares:

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!

Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof;

Or, by the worth of mine eternal soul,

Thou hadst been better have been born a dog

Than answer my waked wrath. (3.3.411-15)

A “waked wrath” has begun to stir within the heart of Othello, a wrath that must be answered to by at least one character before the end of the play. Though jealousy is allowed in the courtly tradition, it has begun to turn into excessive passion—a characteristic personified in the Othello that murders Desdemona.

The excessive passion that ruins the life and heroic story of Othello the Moor of Venice is constituted through his own acts of folly, yet he does not recognize that it is through his own irresponsible actions that his relationship with Desdemona fails. Shakespeare paints a subtle look at how Othello neglects his responsibilities as a husband and lover in the courtly tradition. Capellanus writes, “He whom the thought of love vexes, eats and sleeps very little” (43), but Othello admits how he ignores this rule when he tells Iago:

What sense had I of her stol’n hours of lust?
I saw 't not, thought it not; it harmed not me.

I slept the next night well, fed well, was free and merry.

I found not Cassio’s kisses on her lips.

He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol’n,

Let him not know ‘t, and he’s not robbed at all. (3.3.289-95)

Of course Othello’s inability to uphold this one courtly principle does not alone destroy his and Desdemona’s marriage, but it is Othello’s inability to recognize his own part as a lover that leads to the destruction of the marriage. Othello, a man who is generally organized and ready to serve with all of his attention and effort, has begun to lose sight of his role in the courtly tradition.

For those who do oppose the marriage of Othello and Desdemona—Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo—Othello’s failing responsibility becomes the target of attacks. While Brabantio comes to some type of bitter acceptance, Iago and Roderigo are the most put out by the elopement. Iago’s jealousy stems both from his having been passed over by Othello for the Lieutenancy, and from his overall dislike of marriage in the courtly tradition. Charney explains, “Iago is the most powerful and most eloquent antagonist of love in all of Shakespeare. […]. To Iago there is no such thing as love, merely lust. Virtue doesn’t exist; nor does any other abstract moral entity […]” (123). On the topic of love and marriage, Iago states: “Our bodies are our gardens, to which our / wills are gardeners” (1.3.362-63), emphasizing the concept of lust and not love. While he is married, Iago is rarely, if ever, presented as a lover. Instead, he is shown in the light of a
barbarian—"What, are you mad? I charged you get you home," (5.2.231), he bellows to Emilia when he feels that she has stepped out of her gender-assigned role. The question of Iago’s sexuality is another source of debate for most scholars and critics, especially as one tries to uncover Iago’s stance on love.

As Capellanus clearly defines that love may only exist between a man and woman, Iago’s affection for Othello contradicts the courtly principle. His scorned statements of “I hate the Moor” and “My cause is hearted” (1.3.409) represent his inward desires of betrayal and revenge. Madelon Gohlke explains, “The feminine posture for a male character is that of the betrayed, and it is the man in this position who portrays women as whores” (155). Like a scorned lover, Iago, in his feminine state, is determined to break apart the courtly “man and woman” relationship ultimately by declaring all women whores. In Act 2, scene 1, he tells Desdemona:

Come on, come on! You are pictures out of door,
Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players
In your huswifery, and huswives in your beds. (122-25)

Iago never has anything of good report for women, especially Desdemona. He is jealous of her relationship with Othello, but more importantly, he is jealous of any relationship anyone has with the Moor. The beginning of the play confirms his jealousy of being passed over for Cassio. Also, Iago’s fantasized cuckoldry by Emilia and Othello is another situation where some other character has replaced him as Othello’s trusted ancient. At the end of Act 2, scene 1, Iago’s plan is
uncovered, but the main emphasis is the desire Iago has to win Othello’s subjection. He proclaims that he intends to “Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me” (2.1.330), even if he must make Othello “egregiously an ass” (2.1.331). Iago in the early stages of the play is the embodiment of the type of man Othello will eventually become: self obsessed with fantasies as opposed to taking part in realistic relationships. Platonic love does not exist in courtly love, yet it is the role of Platonic love in Othello that fulfills the Petrarchan concept of love. The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms explains, “The Platonic lover admires the beauty in a human body as a sign of or step toward higher spiritual beauty and ultimately the absolute and perfect beauty in and of God” (345). The idea of a sexual love does not fit into the Platonic, or Petrarchan, idea of love due to the heavy association of same gender relationships. Even though there is no emphasis on sexual relationships between same genders, there still remains a conflict with the courtly concept of love since love in the courtly world involves physical, mental, and spiritual subjection.

Roderigo, however, is the embodiment of the traditional lover who has also been denied love, even though he has followed all of the conventions of love that he can think of. He had long desired to woo and win Desdemona, but Othello manages to sneak in and steal away the maiden—a motion that is not uncommon in the tradition of courtly love. Like the character Absolon in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale,” Roderigo is a failed courtly lover. Neely writes:

Roderigo, most obviously a coxcomb, shows in exaggerated fashion the dangerous combination of romanticism and misogyny
and the dissociation of love and sex that all the men share. He is a parody of the conventional Petrarchan lover [...]. (111)

His inability to win Desdemona, regardless of his many attempts before and during the play, represents how the mockery of courtly love starts in the play. Roderigo, the man who upholds the newly founded Petrarchan concepts of love, is beaten by the older, by age and technique, Othello. Therefore the play in its entirety is a mockery of the rule: “Boys do not love until they arrive at the age of maturity” (Capellanus 42). Othello clarifies that he found love when he was “declined into the vale of years” (3.3.307), a fact that haunts him throughout the play, especially when he begins to doubt Desdemona’s faithfulness. Act 1, scene 3, contains another mocked courtly love principle. Capellanus states: “Love is always a stranger in the home of avarice” (42)—and avarice, or the importance of money, is the main topic of Iago’s speech. He guides Roderigo to “put money in thy purse” (1.3.386) no less than five times, insisting that Othello and Desdemona’s marriage will fail and that Roderigo’s money will in essence attract Desdemona. Charney elaborates, “Iago lectures Roderigo, as he will later lecture Othello, on the nature and origins of the passions” (123), but Iago is often associated as an enemy of love and not an apostle of love.

The idea of religion also has a significant role in the courtly tradition and its relationship to the play. Though courtly love was thought of as a religion unto itself, Christianity, and therefore the belief in a Universal force, prevailed as the main religion associated with the rules of courtly love. Brabantio’s acceptance of the marriage brings forth a Christian salutation. He wishes his daughter and the
Moor, “God be with you!” (1.3.219), even if it is meant more apathetically than joyously. Brabantio’s statement is reminiscent of Duke Theseus’ famous love statement in “The Knight’s Tale.” Theseus, who also appears in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a messenger of love, believes that there is one great creator of the universe that moves love in an orderly way. He states:

> The Firste Moevere of the cause above,  
> Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love,  
> Greet was th’effect, and heigh was his entente.  
> Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente,  
> For with that faire cheyne of love he bond  
> The fyre, the eyre, the water, and the lond  
> In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee. (2987-2995)

The natural order of things, particularly love, must be accepted in this aspect of the play. Brabantio has for the moment recognized love and marriage as a natural path fulfilling aspects of Christian beliefs. One of the Senators even states:

> “Adieu, brave Moor, use Desdemona well” (1.3.332) before exiting the stage.

The line both entices the natural order of sexuality as well as the turning role of vassal and lord relationship.

Critical controversy in the natural order of love arises with the role of adultery, and even marriage for that matter, in the courtly tradition. C.S. Lewis writes: “The association of love with adultery—an association which has lasted in continental literature down to our own times—has deeper causes […]. Two things prevented the men of that age from connecting their ideal of romantic and
passionate love with marriage” (13). The two contentions are described by Lewis
as, one, the actual practice of the feudal society that was once in existence—a
place where marriage was not seen in terms of loving relationships but toleration,
and two, the medieval theory of marriage—specifically, the role sexuality played
in marriage. Lewis further explains that

[... ] according to the medieval view passionate love itself was
wicked, and did not cease to be wicked if the object of it were your
wife. If a man had once yielded to this emotion he had no choice
between “guilty” and “innocent” love before him: he had only the
choice, either of repentance, or else of different forms of guilt.

(14)

However, Lewis is quick to point out that even these two conventions were in the
process of changing and conforming to the rules of love, “When we come down
to the later Middle Ages this view is modified” (14-15). Brabantio warns Othello
that since Desdemona has been false to her father, she will do the same to her
husband, yet Othello believes in the natural chain of all things: she will be faithful
to him in thought, sexuality, and love. Thus, the courting and wooing scene ends
on a high note, even if it is ridden with mockery and scorn within the underlining
ideas and principles associated with the courtly lover and the courtly love
tradition.

Although Act 1, scene 3, is the primary scene of wooing in Othello,
Shakespeare also mentions and mocks the wooing of Desdemona in a few other
scenes. Act 2, scene 1, concerns the reunion of Desdemona and Othello on the
island of Cyprus after the defeat of the Turkish army. The two lovers are overwhelmed and enticed by their love for one another and Desdemona says, “The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow!” (2.1.210-12); her comment is applicable to the courtly rule, “It is well known that love is always increasing or decreasing” (Capellanus 42). In terms of wooing, the act of wooing and the beginning marital relationship for the lovers starts out on a high note. The love increases through the early portions of the play, yet the tragedy is based around the decreasing actions of love and courtly principles. Of Desdemona’s statement Neely explains, “She rejects Othello’s desire to stop time, instead emphasizing love’s growth” (116); however, all of the blame is not to be placed on Othello in terms of love’s decreasing actions. Desdemona is also enticed by an idealized and unrealistic view of love, and both of the lovers forgo the concept that love must increase and decrease. Thus, as love waxes and wanes, the lovers lose sight of their ultimate commitment to one another through marriage and courtly codes.
CHAPTER II
THE MARRIAGE BED OF OTHELLO AND DESDEMONA

Critic Carol Thomas Neely explains: “The marriage bed is at the very heart of the tragedy of Othello [...]. Whether the marriage is consummated, when it is consummated, and what the significance of this consummation is for Othello and Desdemona have all been an important source of debate about the play” (105). The criticism focused around the marriage bed of Othello and Desdemona is particularly interesting primarily due to the all important question: was the marriage consummated? Associated with fulfillment, completion, and meeting an ultimate goal or end, consummation also leads to fruition—something that does not occur in the “green world” wasted war-land of Cyprus. The role of the consummation serves as an important part of the plot and climax of the play, especially the perversion of the consummation, as it relates to and mocks courtly love values.

From Chaucer’s Troilus and Cryseide, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue,” to Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte D’Arthur, courtly love literature is full of well-noted consummations. Neely also states:

Relations between love, sexuality, and marriage are under scrutiny in Othello, as in the comedies, problem plays, and Hamlet. In more extreme form than in the problem plays, we see here the idealization and degradation of sexuality, the disintegration of male authority and the loss of female power, the isolation of men and women, and the association of sexual consummation with
death. (105)

The fact that Shakespeare does not include a clear image of the consummation is contributed to by three factors: it upholds the idea of moving from courtly codes and traditions to the more limited classical, or Petrarchan, conventions; the staging of the play is limited by time; and the debatable topic adds to the climax and overall emphasis of perversion and transformation in the play, particularly through the death scene.

As Othello opens, the audience is first introduced to an already in-progress conversation between Roderigo and Iago. One courtly rule that becomes immediately apparent is, “Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women” (Capellanus 43). The love triangles are thus revealed: Roderigo loves Desdemona who loves Othello, and so on. Roderigo, a wealthy man of Venice, has for some time been paying Iago to keep an eye on Desdemona, as well as to help Roderigo woo and win the maiden. Most likely, it is Iago who has revealed to Roderigo the marriage of the two lovers. Iago as watchman should have reported that there was a relationship brewing between Desdemona and Othello, yet there is no hint of this in the conversation of this scene or anywhere else in the play. However, Iago does not face the concept of failing to act; instead, he chose not to act in order to become the manipulator of this particular situation.

The opening scene also introduces the framework of the play, a pattern similar to that of a comedy. As clearly stated in the title, Othello is not a comedy but indeed a tragedy. The opening speeches of Iago and Roderigo have been in
progress for who knows how long, but the conversation does not reveal the marriage of the Moor and lady until midway through the scene when Iago shouts his famous phrase, "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daugh- / ter and the Moor are now making the beast with / two backs" (1.1.129-31) to the bewildered Brabantio. Apart from being a graphic description of the sexual act, Iago does not first mention that Desdemona and Othello are married, but that they are in some way or another consummating their relationship. The actual words of the marriage are revealed in line 188 when Brabantio asks if the lovers are married and Roderigo mutters, "Truly, I think they are" (1.1.190). Still, a firm acknowledgement of the marriage is not given in this scene; for the main emphasis remains on the deed that Desdemona and Othello are presumed to be in the midst of performing.

Iago's description is whole-heartedly malicious and dripping with thoughts of sin. Although he is a husband, Iago does not provide insight as a lover. Instead, he passes judgment as though he were a higher authority—Priest, Apostle, or even God. His remark also solidifies that the act in question is a mutual communion, but he portrays Desdemona as the one who initiated the act, thus beginning the long illusion of her as a harlot or strumpet. Iago does not worship Desdemona or women; instead, he finds them as faulty, sinful, and open. Peter Stallybrass, in his essay "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," describes the perception of a harlot in Renaissance society. He writes:

The signs of the "harlot" are her linguistic "fullness" and her frequenting of public space. In contrast, the ideal wife is
represented by Venus with her foot upon a tortoise, signifying in
Alciati's Emlema liber (1531) "that women should remain at
home and be chary of speech." [...] This "Woman," like
Bakhtin's classical body, is rigidly "finished": her signs are the
enclosed body, the closed mouth, the locked house. (25)

In the opening scene Desdemona is automatically introduced as property, a
concept that applied in courtly love and Petrarchan conventions, for she is
something that should be locked in the house and kept with money and other
precious items of property and prosperity. When Brabantio arrives on cue,
Roderigo first asks, "Signor, is all your family within?" (1.1.91), but it is Iago
who asks, "Are your doors locked?" (1.1.92)—thus, indicating that some thievery
has occurred or even that someone has escaped from under the Senator's watchful
eye.

When Desdemona finally enters in Act 1, scene 3, she represents
everything Iago, and Bakhtin and his idea of the classical body, detests. She
speaks openly in public, having been solicited by invitation; thus the image of the
opened mouth begins a long and harrowing role in the play, particularly in
reference to Desdemona, even though she is not deemed a sinful and sexual
creature until much later in the play. Shakespeare's image of Desdemona's open
mouth is similar to Chaucer's Wife of Bath's gapped teeth—another promiscuous
implication. In her prologue and tale, the Wife of Bath addresses love and the
desires of women by recalling a popular chivalric romance. It is through her
reference of strong women that she is mocked and satirized, much like
Desdemona. The main point of the wife’s lay is centered on what women want most: the subjection of men. As she demonstrates in her own prologue—

Now herkenth how I bar me properly:

Ye wyse wyves, that can understonde
Thus shul ye speke and bere hem wrong on honed,
For half so boldely can ther be no man
Swere and lyen as a woman can. (224-28)

The Wife explains that there are many ways a woman can entice subjection from a man, but rather than lying, the most important act is for women to deny men sexual gratification. Yet, the Wife rather enjoys the delights of the wedding night, an act used as argument against her. She states:

God woot this noble king, as to my wit,
The firste night had many a mery fit
With ech of hem, so wel was him on lyve!
Blessed be God that I have wedded five,
Of whiche I have pyked out the beste,
Both of here nether purs and of here cheste. (39-44)

The image of the Wife’s description drips with sexuality, satire and sinfulness, yet she is uninhibited by her own desires. She embodies the type of woman Desdemona is accused of representing—one who loves sex and will do anything, even deny her husband and essential owner the pleasure of the flesh. However, the problem remains that Desdemona never speaks of consummation or of her sexual relationship with Othello. The only scene that relates any type of
intercourse or communion is the perversion of the marriage right—the death scene.

As well, Desdemona bridges an idea of the private versus the public spheres. By courtly tradition her romance with Othello has remained safe due to the non-public display of events. Only the lovers, Cassio, Iago, and to some degree Roderigo were aware of the courtship, but once the marriage is discovered all of Venice, as well as Cyprus, become aware of the relationship. The idea of separating public and private spheres is not a new technique developed by Shakespeare. Rather, he used it to emphasize the downfall of several characters and relationships. In Othello, however, there are very few private scenes, but the most important ones generally take place in the bedroom. Desdemona and Emilia’s boudoir scene is the only scene of its kind in the play—a place where the audience is given a full in-depth look at women’s private life. The private scene counterbalances the public scenes of women, especially those where they are accused of being unfaithful and strumpets, as well as it describes the role of women’s new found subjection in the play. Also, the death scene is perhaps the most important private scene; the build up has been intense, or even arousing, yet the act is in all practicality deadly and sinful.

The idea of consummation reappears in Act 1, scene 3, after the Senators and Duke have listened to the defenses of Desdemona and Othello. One Senator even states: “Adieu, brave Moor, use Desdemona well” (1.3.332) as he parts for the night. Through this statement the Senator reveals that he accepts the conduct of sexuality in marriage, as well as sends a blessing on the marriage—proposing
that it be well and that Othello takes care of his wife. A few lines below, as Othello prepares to leave for Cyprus to face the Turkish army, the two lovers prepare to part. After arranging for Emilia and Iago to bring Desdemona to Cyprus “in the best advantage,” (1.3.339) Othello replies, “Come, Desdemona, I have but an hour / Of love, of worldly matters, and direction / To spend with thee. We must obey the time” (1.3.340-42). The two lovers have a very limited amount of time to spend together, and out of the matters listed, love is most likely the lowest item on the list. Othello must prepare domestic or financial instructions for his wife before he leaves, especially since they are newly married. The marriage night of the lovers has once again been interrupted: first by the summons to the Senate, and now by the geographical separation of Othello’s military obligations.

Failure to act is generally discussed in Hamlet, yet it seems that Othello also fails to act, at least in terms of consummation. Neely explains that “the men’s idealism, misogyny, foolishness, and anxiety are mocked, transformed and dispelled—‘laugh[ed] to scorn’ (AYL, 4.2.19)—by disguises and mocked by deaths, by parodied or aborted nuptials, by delayed or deceitful consummations” (110). Othello’s insecurity begins to mutate into hatred, but the transformation of his feelings can often be confused, or at first glance explained away, with a courtly principle: “A man in love is always apprehensive” (Capellanus 43). Something evil is brewing on the isle of Cyprus, and Othello’s military instinct does pick up the questionable attitude; he questions Iago in Act 3, scene 3—“By heaven, thou echo’st me / As if there were some monster in thy thought / Too
hideous to be shown” (121-23). His inability to act, or to consummate, is a precautionary movement to protect his beloved; however, by the end, he fails to protect his wife from his own hideousness, for jealousy and selfishness become the roots of evil in terms of Desdemona and Othello’s love.

When Desdemona and Othello are reunited in Cyprus, their marriage celebration is once again interrupted by the malicious hand of Iago. In Act 2, scene 2, a Herald proclaims:

> It is Othello’s pleasure, our noble and valiant general, that upon certain tidings now arrived, importing the mere perdition of the Turkish fleet, every man put himself into triumph […]. For besides these beneficial news, it is the celebration of his nuptial. So much was his pleasure should be proclaimed. (2.2.1-9)

During the celebration Othello assigns Cassio to be a watchman, a logical choice considering that Othello wants to set up a safe and stable environment while he is absent from his military duties. Cassio is a double watchman—he is protecting both Cyprus and fulfilling the role as watchman for Othello. As Desdemona and Othello part, the Moor informs the audience that his intentions are clear: he and Desdemona are going to finally consummate their marriage. He states, “The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue; / That profit’s yet to come ‘tween me and you” (2.3.11-12). Unlike Iago, Othello’s description of the consummation upholds fruition, love, and unity.

Iago, overhearing the Moor’s plans, begins to plot how he can once again separate the new couple, and he succeeds once again at interrupting the marriage
right by enticing a drunken Cassio. The lovers are faced with separation as Othello attends to his military duties, and thus, they cannot celebrate the union of their marriage. The courtly rule, “The easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized” (Capellanus 42), begins to be mocked. Othello views the difficulty of attainment as frustrating, and he cannot see the ultimate end or goal. Eventually, he decides that “the heat and appetite with sex [...] are not for him” (Leggatt 119). The fact that the marriage has not been consummated begins to take a toll on Othello, and he doubts his own abilities as well as the purity of his wife. Leggatt writes, “Sex will become an obsession, and Desdemona’s sexuality not a matter of indifference but a nightmare” (119). His passion and desire for the lustful implications of marriage begin to fuel his passion and jealous nature to prove Desdemona a strumpet.

Jealousy is the poison that does not allow Othello and Desdemona to rightfully consummate their marriage. In the beginning of the play it is Iago and Brabantio’s jealousies that keep the lovers apart as they are summoned to the Senate. As Desdemona is deemed property, and therefore wealth, the jealous nature of avarice is immediately introduced to the plot of the play. However, Othello does not begin to view Desdemona as his property, as opposed to his beloved, until he fears she has been unfaithful. In Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England, Natasha Korda explains:

Jealousy was conceived [...] as an affliction arising from the institution of private property; it was predicated on a model of
subjectivity grounded in the prerogatives of the possessive individual, while at the same time laying bare this model’s attendant anxieties of dispossession. [...] As a discourse of subjective dispossession, jealousy was frequently linked to subjects who were excluded from the prerogatives of possession: Africans and women were thought to be particularly susceptible to jealousy. (114)

According to this theory, it is the nature of Othello’s ethnicity that brings forth his jealousy. However, Capellanus’ outline of courtly principles also explains why the lover begins to become jealous of his beloved.

Capellanus outlines that “Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love” (43), or as he further explains, “Love increases, likewise, if one of the lovers feels real jealousy, which is called, in fact, the nurse of love” (27). In other words, if someone is trying to steal away the lover’s beloved, then, in theory, his love should increase through the jealous desire to keep her. Othello does not win in this battle because he gives up too easily; he condemns Desdemona before he has any ocular proof of her affair with Cassio. Iago forewarns Othello:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;

Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves! (3.3.196-200)

Othello tries to put aside Iago’s smooth speeches, yet the jealousy of love and
ownership begin to grow in his heart and mind. He denies that there is any pain on the thought of being a cuckold husband until Iago’s words strike the right chord. Also, the idea of the monster within, or the idea of applying “horns,” is a symbol relevant to cuckoldry. Finally, Othello confesses:

She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
And not their appetites! (3.3.308-11).

From this point forward, Othello’s jealous nature begins to emerge, and by doing so, his selfish jealousy contradicts his expectations and actions as a courtly lover. Although he should feel some form of jealousy, in return he should aim to protect and keep his beloved happy and remain submissive. Iago, however, convinces him that he can instead act upon his jealous nature to backstab those who have caused him pain. His focus turns from desiring the physicality of Desdemona to conquering, or consummating, his own inner lust for revenge.

The most extravagant and overly-debated scene of consummation is in the death scene of Act 5, scene 2. At the end of scene 1 Othello replies: “This is the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite” (5.1.150-51). In his career as a lover and in his militaristic career he has faced great challenges, and Act 5, scene 2, is the greatest challenge of all. However, no man may serve two masters, and neither may Othello serve both Iago and Desdemona. Ultimately, he must choose his beloved and courtly values or his ensign and pagan-pseudo values.

Shakespeare’s own sonnet sequence reflects the desires of all two tormented
souls—Othello and Desdemona—as the question of consummation constantly arises in the play. Sonnet 57 arouses the lord and vassal relationship—a subject passively waiting to be brought to life:

Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour
When you have bid your servant once adieu.
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought
Save where you are how happy you make those. (6-12)

The description reflects both the contemplations of the couple: Desdemona patiently waiting in the bedchamber obeying his commands and contemplating his actions, and Othello challenging the courtly relationship and taking on Petrarchan attitudes. Desdemona indeed waits as “a sad slave” and “watches the clock” for the hour of her final consummation. Although she is driven with doubt, the emphasis of her wedding sheets and the hope that her husband may have walked off his anger fills her with some small hope for a future.

For a man who relies heavily on his own genealogical placement, future and fruition, though, are not concepts applied in Othello, for Desdemona is robbed of her right to maternity when she is murdered, another act that mocks the rules of courtly love. One of the rules states: “That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish” (Capellanus 42). The death scene of Desdemona, however, is a perversion of what the consummation should have
been. Blood is spilt on the "wedding linens," but love has transformed into hatred. Instead of communion, the scene represents the "rape" of physical, spiritual, and rhetorical purities. Othello declares: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul [...] When I have plucked the / rose, / I can not give it vital growth again" (5.2.1-15). His description of the murder is very erotic and channels the act of consummation. The "cause" being the actual fornication, the "rose" plucked is the virginity of Desdemona, and the inability to give "vital growth again" could represent a physical dysfunction, or even the inability to take back the act—taking the virginity.

The consummation for Othello in this scene is more of a religious/spiritual act than that of two lovers physically consummating their marriage. While the consummation of a marriage is associated with communion, Othello seems to have returned to his "natural" or pagan instincts—animal instincts even. He shows little compassion or mercy in terms of Christian values. He does ask Desdemona if she has prayed, yet when she asks to be allowed one last prayer he denies her request. Most importantly, he is upset not so much that he has been cuckolded, presumably so, but that his line, or tale, cannot continue. He replies, "[...] I saw my handkerchief in his hand!" (5.2.77)—the symbol that represents fidelity and lineage no longer passes through his line but through that of another man. Othello finally replies: "O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart / And mak'st me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice!" (5.2.78-80). Desdemona, in Othello's eyes, transforms from wife to mere woman, and finally to "strumpet," or prostitute. She becomes a beast that must be
sacrificed to not a Christian God, but that of a pagan. In order to restore balance to the world Othello deems it unsinful to “sacrifice his wife.”

The role of consummation and the lack of fruition in *Othello* is not the typical opinion Shakespeare tended to present. He seemed welcomed to the idea of sexual identity and often wrote of sexuality in marriage, as well as out of it, as acceptable. Fruition was a topic faced in courtly tales—the preservation of Camelot—and Elizabethan plays—especially the history plays. In sonnet 1 Shakespeare wrote:

> From fairest creatures we desire increase,
> That thereby beauty’s rose might never die,
> But, as the riper should by time decrease,
> His tender heir might bear his memory. (1-4)

The beauty of the ideal lover was not so typically preserved in idealized physical form, but also through spiritual and sexual connection. Consummation was necessary in order to preserve families and to preserve the love that existed between a man and a wife. Desdemona and Othello were robbed of this treasure. The death of Desdemona is not what mattered most, but that through his consummation of their relationship, Othello ended all hope for what he wanted and desired most—to continue his genealogical line.
CHAPTER III

ACCUSATIONS AND INNOCENCE: WOMEN'S LOSS OF POWER IN

*OTHELLO*

Through his many comedies, Shakespeare has provided strong, independent, and cunning women. Desdemona is introduced in the same light as Rosalind or Portia; however, her fate is much different from the other maidens. Her diminishing influence on Othello and her death exemplify how courtly love is mocked and how women lose their power/courtly influence in the play. In courtly tradition literature, primarily Arthurian romances and Lais, women played predominant and powerful roles in securing the future of knights, friends, lovers, and husbands. The women of *Othello* essentially inhabit the same roles personified by the multitude of Guineveres, yet nothing good comes of the similar situations.

The voices and actions of women, most particularly that of Desdemona, contribute largely to the plot and development of the play. There is much criticism dedicated to the male roles of the play—Othello and Iago's good versus evil relationship, for example—yet it is prudent to note equally abundant, if not more so, criticism that discusses the female roles. Desdemona is the primary female character that Shakespeare focuses on in terms of women's loss of power as the play develops, and she is also the main topic for most feminist critics. In relation to courtly love rules and concepts, the real battle of good versus evil is reflected in the marital and love relationships, specifically the relationships Desdemona forges with Othello, Iago, and Cassio.
*Othello* opens in a familiar pattern Shakespeare established in the comedies. Neely explains, “In [the comedies], realism and romanticism, lust and love, desire and illusion, love and friendship, cuckoldry and marriage, masculinity and femininity are held in precarious balance” (215). In *Othello*, however, it is the imbalance of these concepts that strengthens the plot and climax of both the play and how women lose their powerful influences over the men. The perversion of the rules of courtly love are what essentially demolishes any hope of survival for Desdemona—and Emilia for that matter—as well as Iago, Othello, and even Roderigo. In *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays*, Neely explains, “The men in *Othello* similarly seek revenge; the women similarly seek to secure harmonious relationships but fail to do so” (109). By the end of the play, the men do not perceive the women as individuals who have the capability of existing without them.

In Act 1, scene 3, Desdemona is presented as Othello’s equal: she is held in high regard by the Venetian Senators, her good opinion is welcomed, and she reflects strength and honor in her words and deeds. Speech, as opposed to sexuality as Iago suggests, is her most powerful tool in associating with and aiding Othello and the other characters of the play. She states:

My noble father,

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education.

My life and education both do learn me

How to respect you. You are the lord of duty.
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my

Husband.

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.208-18)

Her speech is merely ten lines long, yet it redeems both her honor and that of
Othello. The Senate accepts her explanation, as well as the more lengthy speech
of Othello, as authentic and standing within the terms of love. The significance of
the speech, however, must be looked at in relation to the location of its delivery
and the audience it was delivered to. Othello and Desdemona are still in Venice,
a community where the older ideas and concepts of love are well established.
Also, the Senate audience is highly important, for the older men understand and
accept the rules of courtly love. Their age and wisdom are the example for
Othello to follow and an example he seems to want to emulate. However, when
the party is transitioned to the “green world” of Cyprus, the established ideals and
positions of the Senate disappear and Othello is left with only the companionship
of Iago, a man who emphasizes Petrarchan ideals over those of courtly love.

The concept of the dying ideals of courtly love was not new in
Shakespeare’s day, for even the latter authors of the Middle Ages hinted at its
social decay. Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales is one source that
reflects the phasing out of courtly rules and codes. Chaucer’s Knight, as he is
described in the “General Prologue,” is one clear reflection of chivalry’s death.
Chaucer writes:

A Knight ther was, and that a worthy man,

That fro the tyme that he first bigan

To ryden out, he loved chivalrye,

Troughte and honour, fredom and curteisye.

Ful worthy was he in his lordes were,

And therto hadde he ridden, no man ferre,

As wel in Cristendom as in hethenesse,

And evere honoured for his worthinesses. (43-50)

Although an honorable man, and accepted by most scholars as one of the only pilgrims who embarks on the pilgrimage with authentic and true reasoning, further description of the Knight reveals Chaucer’s true use of the pilgrim:

His hors were gode, but he was nat gay.

Of fustian he wered a gipoun

Al bismotered with his habergeoun,

For he was late y-come from his viage,

And wente for to doon his pilgrimage. (74-78)

The Knight had recently come from an expedition to join the pilgrimage. His dress is simple, old, and worn, and his tunic is “bismotered” with rust stained by his chain mail. In other words, the Knight is of antiquity—he is a representation of a dying breed. The Knight’s description is worthy of Shakespeare’s Othello—a man who devoted his life to service, truth, honor, and fidelity, and because he is someone characterized by his age. Chivalry, however, is a principle Othello
claims to love and uphold yet fails to protect. He swears to Brabantio, “My life upon her faith!” (1.3.335) in response to Brabantio’s warning that his daughter had deceived him and could therefore do the same to Othello. Instead, the Moor sacrifices Desdemona due to his own lack of faith—a scene that reflects the death of the courtly code and principles. In order to fully understand the importance of the death bed scene, an analysis of a few other major scenes is vital.

Desdemona, Iago, and Emilia’s arrival to Cyprus is another scene that shows the conflicts of the merging courtly and Petrarchan worlds. With Othello momentarily off stage, Iago and Cassio are left with the responsibility of tending to Desdemona. The differing opinions of the two men exemplify the contrasting ideas of courtly conduct and the new Renaissance conventions. Cassio represents the idealized courtly form of Desdemona. When Montano inquires about Othello’s wife, Cassio replies:

Most fortunately. He has achieved a maid
That paragons description and wild fame,
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th’ essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener. (4.1.67-71)

His description is beyond loyalty to convention—he presents her as a work of art, not a mere woman. Her beauty, such as it is, is beyond description, that of wild fame. He boasts that creation itself tires in the task of describing her beauty. Never once does he speak of her strength, loyalty, fidelity, or true personality. To Cassio she is a woman meant to be loved and showed the most outright customs
of nobility purely because of her sex. Interestingly, though, Cassio’s praise seems as though it were Desdemona who sent him on the quest even though his orders are from the Duke of Venice. Much like the courtly knights of the Middle Ages, Cassio embarks upon the quest of a beloved. In *The Allegory of Love* C.S. Lewis explains, “Courtesy demands that the lover should serve all ladies, not all women” (35). Cassio upholds this tradition through his treatments of the three primary ladies: Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. Desdemona and Emilia are higher birth, and therefore he treats them with courtesy and understands that he is meant to bend to their subjection, something he does not do for Bianca. While Desdemona is not his true love, for she is neither his wife nor his mistress, she does symbolically represent the Faerie Queen or Guinevere that would provide aid in an important journey, thus further separating her from her true identity as a real human being. In his eyes, Desdemona embodies the role of a fair lady sent to help aid him in his journey as a soldier both with the threat of the approaching Turkish army, as well as later in the play when he is stripped of his lieutenancy.

Cassio’s actions towards Desdemona speak louder than his words of praise and service. When Desdemona enters for the first time in Act 2, he bows to her as though she were his general and not merely his general’s wife. He speaks:

O, behold,

The riches of the ship is come on shore!

You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees.

[He kneels.]

Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven,
Before, behind thee, and on every hand

Enwheel thee round. [He rises.] (2.1.91-96)

Cassio dedicates his service and that of the other soldiers' to the "divine Desdemona" (2.1.80), the Muse that carries and protects them through the battlefields of life and war. In the same scene Cassio takes Desdemona by the hand as he addresses her, an act that clearly Iago disagrees with. Iago replies in an aside, "Ay, smile upon her, do. I will / gyve thee in thine own courtship" (2.1.184-85). His response to Cassio's words and actions are reminiscent of the ancient ideals pertaining to love.

Like the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, Iago views love in terms of sinful acts and not passionate devotion. Also, he deems love only acceptable in terms of spirituality and not physicality. In his introduction to *The Art of Courtly Love*, Locke explains, "The view of passionate love between the sexes is alien to the Greeks and the Romans. Whenever passionate love manifests itself in the literature of Antiquity, it is either regarded as a chastisement inflicted on men by the gods [...] and it is viewed simply as sensual gratification" (iv). The birth of the Renaissance in England was a reaction to the conventions of the Middle Ages. Poets, writers, and dramatists sought the insight of the ancient Romans and Greeks to guide them into the new age of technology and literature. Thus, the Renaissance author adopted the principles of Francesco Petrarch, an Italian poet who wrote during the middle of the 14th century. His muse was a woman named Laura, and although there is speculation to her actual existence, one thing is certain: Petrarch's descriptions of Laura conflicted with the clichés presented by
Troubadours and courtly love. She provoked an inner spiritual love that rampaged as passion in his work, and in return, it is his overly developed descriptions of the female that were copied into the Renaissance literature.

Iago is the Petrarchan idealist of the play, and his hatred is not only for Othello, but for the principles and laws that Othello attempts to use to govern his life. Iago has made it his mission to change the courtly rules of vassal and lord back into the feudal male dominated system. It is through Iago’s manipulations and misleadings that courtly love fails in Othello. Iago’s arrival at Cyprus is the full arrival of the male dominated ideals and principles for love and marriage. He even admits—“For I am nothing if not critical” (2.1.134) as he and Desdemona play a game of wits. She entices him to praise her and he responds, “If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit, / The one’s for use, the other useth it” (2.1.144-45). His hypocritical statements are not solely focused on Desdemona but on all women. Iago emphasizes that women, whether ugly or beautiful, intelligent or stupid, lady or woman, are worthless and lazy except for when it comes to sex. Desdemona laughs at the folly and belittlement Iago presents, and she replies, “O, most lame and impotent conclusion!” (2.1.176). Unlike Cassio, Iago’s words speak louder than his actions—primarily because he manipulates the other characters to act for him.

Iago’s perspective on women is shared by Theophrastus, a Greek philosopher who lived nearly two-thousand years before Shakespeare. Theophrastus, who succeeded Aristotle as head of the Peripatetic school, also believed women to be deceitful and useless. In his work The Golden Book on
Marriage he claims, "[...] a faithful servant, obedient to his master’s authority and conforming to his wishes, is a better majordomo than a wife, who only considers herself mistress of the house if she goes against her husband’s wishes; that is, she does what she pleases, not what she’s told" (359). Like Theophrastus, Iago views all women’s actions as inappropriate and demurring to men. He takes every opportunity that becomes readily available to belittle and ridicule women and their role in the world. Although he states that he loves Desdemona (2.1.313), he admits that it is only for the fact that he can use her as an example to all men and women. In Act 2, scene 3, Iago outwardly discusses his hatred and sickness of Desdemona’s role:

And then for her

To win the Moor—were ’t to renounce his baptism,

All seals and symbols of redeemed sin—

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

With his weak function. How am I then a villain [...]? (362-68)

Further he explains that he will make an example of Desdemona by exposing her infidelity and turn her into the substance to entangle his other enemies. His actions are non-courtly due to his desire to destroy the lord/vassal relationship that courtly love is based upon. His reasoning embellishes the idea of sin and the association it has with his, and all men’s, Christian baptism. Iago claims that Othello is worshipping the god-like Desdemona instead of the one God, and
therefore the Moor is returning to his pagan roots.

As well as the Christian influence of courtly love, at least two other principles of the courtly tradition are obviously contaminated. First, "A lover can never have enough of the solaces of his beloved" (Capellanus 43) does not continually exist in the tale. In Act 1, scene 3, Othello welcomes the solace of Desdemona as she speaks on his behalf to the Senators and her father. As Desdemona arrives, Othello replies, "Here comes the lady. Let her speak of it" (1.3.196)—as he openly allows her the chance to speak on her own behalf. By Act 3, however, after Cassio has embarrassed himself and lost his position through a drunken stupor, Othello becomes less welcoming to the advice and pleas of his beloved wife. Othello pleads, "Not now, sweet Desdemona. Some other time" (3.3.60), and a few lines later he promises, "I will deny thee nothing" (3.3.84) and again in line 93, "I will deny thee nothing!" He states that he will be the vassal and Desdemona the lord—"Love can deny nothing to love" (Capellanus 43)—but it is true power and his own will that Othello seeks. Instead of obeying his wife and bending to her will, he later finds a way to bend her to his will. The intense moment depicted in Act 3 upholds a courtly principle, yet at the same time mocks the concept of how it should play out. For "if love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives" (Capellanus 43), and the love between Desdemona and the Moor is quickly failing.

Desdemona’s promise to Cassio in Act 3, scene 2, is an important use of foreshadowing and an important example of her persistence. After promising to speak on his behalf, Desdemona states about Othello:
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. Therefore be merry, Cassio,
For thy solicitor shall rather die
Than give thy cause away. (3.2.25-30)

And so Desdemona dies on behalf of Cassio. The roles of Desdemona and Othello have inverted; she has become the pursuer and the one to uphold the courtly codes of conduct. She remains loyal, honorable, and truthful—all qualities that Othello has openly noted in his soldiers, for example, Iago. Othello, on the other hand, has developed into a selfish state; he will not heed the warnings or the apologies of Desdemona. In turn he blames her for his own deceits and folly.

Paula S. Berggren, in her essay "The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays," explains:

When men revile women, they cry out against their own failures, hating themselves for what women 'tempt' them to; women, by contrast, curse men for external, verifiable wrongs against them.
Women resent men for oppressing them, while men despise women for reminding them that they are creatures of the flesh. (26)

Othello's own insecurities allow him to be easily persuaded that Desdemona has made him a cuckold. He forewarns Desdemona in Act 3, scene 3, when he states: "Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee; and when I love thee not / Chaos is
come again” (91-93). Later he ponders the question “Why did I marry?” (3.3.283)—a clear sign that his role as courtly lover is beginning to wane. His failures as a lover, husband, and Christian are not a clear reflection of Desdemona’s actions. She has done nothing but support him in his role as her husband, lover, and as a General of Venice. He won her by his tales of heroic battles and his mystical life before being stolen away and converted to Christendom. Desdemona is more than a muse or another character that he can add to his heroic tale: she is a woman of flesh and blood.

Desdemona further irritates Othello and his new found Petrarchan ideals in the beginning of Act 4. When Lodovico arrives to Cyprus to deliver orders from the Duke, he inquires after Lieutenant Cassio. It is Desdemona not Othello who quickly answers his questions: “Cousin, there’s fall’n between him and my lord / An unkind breach, but you shall make all well” (4.1.247-48). In response Othello bellows, “Are you sure of that?” (4.1.248). This is the first time in the play that Othello openly questions Desdemona, as well as denies her the chance to freely speak (an enormous change from the opening Senate scene). As the scene continues Desdemona and Lodovico witness Othello’s transformation, and Lodovico questions Othello about his unusual behavior. Lodovico even witnesses Othello striking Desdemona, an action that shocks the messenger who has recently left the Venetian Senators and the world where courtly love is still an existing code. “Good character alone makes any man worthy of love” (Capellanus 43) is yet another principle of courtly love to be mocked in the play. The good character of Othello has transformed into anger and jealousy. His
manner has changed from the, "Not now sweet Desdemona," statements to public embarrassment. Othello no longer desires to be submissive to Desdemona; instead now he seeks the obedience of Desdemona. Othello further embarrasses her as she is exiting the scene—he calls her to turn back but remarks, "And she's obedient, as you say, obedient. / Very obedient [...]" (4.1.287-88). He treats his wife like a dog instead of like a lady, wife, or equal. He views her as sinful and therefore disobedient to his will and disobedient to their marriage vows.

Power in the Renaissance was viewed through the male perspective. In the opening of Act 4, scene 2, Othello questions Emilia wanting to know if Cassio and Desdemona ever secretly met, whispered in private, or were ever left alone. Emilia denies that her lady was ever unfaithful to the Moor, but Othello doubts her responses. His mind has taken on the same questionable attitude of Iago; he does not believe the words of any woman to be truthful only deceitful. He responds, "She says enough. Yet she's a simple bawd / That cannot say as much. This is a subtle whore, / A closet lock and key of villainous secrets" (4.2.22-24). Othello's trust in words has diminished to only his trust in actions. He first examines Desdemona physically before finally outwardly questioning her. His actions are reminiscent of the principle: "A man who is vexed by too much passion usually does not love" (Capellanus 43). The Moor's passion is no longer limited to loving his wife and obeying her every command, for, instead, it has mutated into a "green monster" full of doubt and conceit. He displays too much passion in proving her a whore instead of listening to her defense that she has been faithful. Once again Othello sends Desdemona out of his presence and is
engulfed by his passion and anger.

One of the most important scenes that plays on the idea of women’s loss of power in *Othello* is the boudoir scene. Critic Carole McKewin, in her essay “Counsels of Gall and Grace: Intimate Conversations between Women in Shakespeare's Plays,” states: “In the tragedies, where the patriarchal world is more oppressive, women are sometimes able to do more, but they talk less to each other. In Shakespeare’s tragic world, this important means of self-expression for women is almost invariable imperfectly realized, perverted, or blocked” (127). The boudoir scene is one of the only instances where the audience is able to view the relationship of Desdemona and Emilia. To follow McKewin’s lead, women are seldomly seen in private conversation in the tragic world, thus the importance of the scene increases. McKewin also states: “With no family or friends, Desdemona and Emilia are alone in a military camp, where masculine conceptions of honor define what a woman is, and no bungling, well-meaning watches come to save the day. The conversation between Emilia and Desdemona reflects the texture of that oppression” (128). In other words, the Petrarchan ideals are beginning to outweigh the courtly ideals by this point of the play. Othello has “defined” Desdemona a strumpet, or whore, and there seems to be no way for Desdemona to reclaim her honor. Also, since she is in Cyprus and not Venice, there is no one to rescue Desdemona from the lies Iago has created. Only Emilia will be able to speak for her in the end.

The conversation and the interaction between Desdemona and Emilia in the boudoir scene provides a momentary glimpse of the feminine world, yet it also
further detaches the two women from their powerful roles. In the opening of the play when the party is still in Venice, men and women are often seen together, for example, the description of Othello often being invited to dine with Brabantio and Desdemona. In Cyprus, however, the men and the women have their different “camps.” Inside this feminine camp Emilia and Desdemona speak of what they would do, not what they have done or will do:

Desdemona: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
Emilia: Why, would not you?
Desdemona: No, by this heavenly light!
Emilia: Nor I neither, by this heavenly light.

I might do ‘t as well I’ th’ dark.

Desdemona: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
Emilia: The world’s a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice. (4.3.71-79)

They are not afraid to openly speak of sexuality, love, and even sin, but the private conversation is a reflection of how they cannot openly speak of such topics with the men or in the presence of men.

The first intimate scene between Desdemona and Othello follows the boudoir scene. While there has been much speculation about the consummation of the marriage, the audience is finally about to witness a consummation, or more properly, a sacrifice. Othello has stripped all but one of Desdemona’s powers from her; in his eyes, she only has the power to hurt. Madelon Gohlke writes, “[...] it is the fear or pain of victimization on the part of the man that leads to his
victimization of women” (156). In order to survive physically and mentally (as well as spiritually and socially), Othello believes that he must destroy Desdemona. In the opening of Act 5, scene 2, Othello replies: “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars. / It is the cause [...]” (1-3). Othello no longer focuses on the solaces and will of his beloved; rather he has turned to defending the honor of all men. He has chosen male friendship and power over the love of Desdemona. In the death scene Desdemona begs, “O banish me, my lord, but kill me not!” and “Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight” (5.2.98-100). The Moor shows no mercy and ignores her pleas, for he believes that he cannot simply send Desdemona away. In order to finally strip away all of her power and control over him, he must take her life. He claims, “It is too late” (105)—and smothers her. Since she was the main symbol of courtly love—the lord to the vassal—Desdemona’s death symbolizes the sacrifice of the courtly principles.

Another rule that Othello fails to uphold states: “When one lover dies, a widowhood of two years is required of the survivor” (Capellanus 42). Othello, and Iago for that matter, does not follow this rule, quite the opposite. After Iago’s deception is revealed, Othello takes the coward’s way out: he commits suicide. His dying wish—“Speak of me as I am [...] of one that loved not wisely, but too well” (5.2.402-04)—is self-centered, remorseful, but still self-indulgent. Othello wants to be remembered as a tragic hero more than a courtly lover. He begins the play with a description of his heroic journeys, uses the body of the play to continue his story, and finally dies with the wish to be remembered through story.
He makes no real attempt to ask for Desdemona's forgiveness or even the forgiveness of his mother—a figure that seems important to him considering her ties to the "ocular proof" handkerchief. Therefore, he cannot participate in the widowhood because the only true source of his love is narcistic.

In his essay "Desdemona's Handkerchief," John Middleton Murry writes, "Othello is the tragedy of human love [...]" (96). Murry does not specify a certain form of love as being the dominant force, but merely calls Othello's love human and therefore faulty—anything man made generally tends to be blemished and temporal. Or, as Kenneth Muir explains, "So we do not merely watch a perfect marriage destroyed by a demi-devil; we watch our 'own divided heart'" (116), re-emphasizing the human nature of the play. By penning the tragic story Shakespeare has brought to life the essence of a challenging and changing world in terms of love and identity. The rules of courtly love were developed as a process and guide to outline who may love and between who love may exist. Charney explains, "[...] that the Moor is black ('the devil'), that he is much older than Desdemona (no 'sympathy in years'), and that his speech is full of 'bombast circumstance, / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war' (1.1.12-13)" (101), describes the familiar scenes of a fabliau from the Middle Ages. Like Absolon in "The Miller's Tale," and even Roderigo, Othello is a poor example of a courtly lover and is unable to exist in such a state through the majority of the play.

In his work *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine explains the pursuit of happiness:

There are some things which are to be enjoyed, others which are to
be used, others still which enjoy and use. Those things which are
objects of enjoyment make us happy. Those things which are
objects of use assist and (so to speak) support us in our efforts
toward happiness, so that we can attain the things that make us
happy and rest in them. We ourselves, who enjoy and use these
things, being placed among both kinds of objects, if we set
ourselves to enjoy those which we ought to use, are hindered in our
course and sometimes even led away from it; so that, getting
entangled in the love of lower gratifications, we lag behind in or
even altogether turn back from the pursuit of the real and proper
objects of enjoyment. (326-27)

Love and the pursuit of a relationship are objects of enjoyment which make
people happy, or at least intended for the purpose of happiness. Though it was
normal in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to use marriage and love as
devices of ridicule and buffoonery, the courtly rules upheld love in association
with rapturous happiness and completion. Suffering and anxiety are effects
caused by full-fledged subjection, but the satisfying moment of seeing the beloved
or being within the presence of the beloved out-weighs the somber atmosphere of
separation. Instead of living by the advice of Iago and other men of the play,
Othello should have first and foremost listened to his beloved Desdemona.
CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that courtly love principles are evident in *Othello*. From the opening scene of uncovering the elopement of Desdemona and Othello, to the murderous consummation of the marriage, and finally the suicide of Othello, Shakespeare employs the help of courtly love principles to heighten the emotions and actions of the key players. While Iago’s actions aided in the destruction of courtly love, it is ultimately Othello’s insecurity that allows him to easily be persuaded to believe that his beloved has committed infidelity. Although Othello tries to present himself in the outmost forms of gentility and courtesy, he fights a losing battle with the principles of courtly love from the beginning. Othello is too old for Desdemona, as he himself mentions in Act 3, scene 3. Also, his insecurities as a racial “other” contradict his formed identity as a knight of Venice. The marriage of Othello and Desdemona follows the methods of *fabliau* to entertain the audience, a comedic appeal; however, the question of consummation and the repressed role of women in the play emphasize the overpowering principles of love philosophies from the ancient Greeks and Romans. The return to the love philosophies of Antiquity during the Renaissance put to rest the rules of courtly love, as is reflected in Othello’s overpowering and murdering Desdemona.

Yet, why is it important to understand the role of courtly love in William Shakespeare’s *Othello*? Compared to the other principles and themes of the play, the role of the blackamoor, the exotic sexuality of Othello, or even the role of the handkerchief, courtly love has an effect on each interpretation. Were it not for the
lovers’ obedience to the simplest of rules, one being “When made public love rarely endures” (Capellanus 42), the play would not exist. In the beginning of their relationship, Othello and Desdemona were able to obey the rules of love, and therefore their love blossomed out of the privacy and intimacy of the beginning courtship. Brabantio would have most likely never given his permission for the marriage to occur, as is evident in his appeal to the Duke and Senators in Act 1, scenes 2 and 3. He claims that his daughter, and property, have been stolen from him and entices the Senators to rule the marriage invalid. However, in Venice, where the older Senators and Duke uphold the rules of courtly love, the marriage is deemed legal and standing. It is from this moment on that the true form of the tragedy begins. Thus, courtly love is no longer a governing principle found in the comedies of William Shakespeare; it is the seed of mockery and satire in The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice.
APPENDIX A

From Andreas Capellanus’ *The Art of Courtly Love*

Chapter VIII

The Rules of Love

Let us come now to the rules of love, and I shall try to present to you very briefly those rules which the King of Love is said to have proclaimed with his own mouth and to have given in writing to all lovers.

One of the knights of Britain was riding alone through the royal forest, going to see Arthur, and when he got well into the interior of this forest he came unexpectedly upon a young girl of marvelous beauty, sitting on a fine horse and binding up her hair. The knight lost no time in saluting her, and she answered him courteously and said, “Briton, no matter how hard you try you can’t succeed in your quest unless you have our help.” When he had heard these words he quickly asked the girl to tell him what he had came for, and then after that he would believe what she said to him. The young girl said to him, “When you asked for the love of a certain British lady, she told you that you could never obtain it unless you first brought back that victorious hawk which, men say, is on a golden perch in Arthur’s court.” The Briton admitted that all this was true, and the girl went on, “You can’t get this hawk that you are seeking unless you prove, by a combat in Arthur’s palace, that you enjoy the love of a more beautiful lady than any man at Arthur’s court has; you can’t even enter the palace until you show the guards the hawk’s gauntlet, and you can’t get this gauntlet except by overcoming two mighty knights in a double combat.”
The Briton answered, "I know that I cannot accomplish this task without your aid, and so I will submit myself to your direction, humbly beseeching you to give me your help in the matter and to permit me to claim, in view of the fact that you are directing me, that I enjoy the love of the more beautiful lady."

The young girl said to him, "If your heart is so stout that you are not afraid to carry out those things of which we have spoken, you may have from us what you ask." The Briton answered, "If you will grant my request, I know that I shall succeed in all that I hope for."

The young girl said to him, "Then let what you request be freely granted to you." Then she gave him the kiss of love and said, indicating the horse on which she was sitting, "This horse will take you everywhere you want to go; but you must go forward without any fear and oppose with the highest courage all those who try to stop you. But bear in mind that after you have gained the victory over the first two who defend the gauntlet you must not accept it from them, but must take it for yourself from the golden pillar where it hangs; otherwise you cannot prevail in the combat at the palace or accomplish what you desire."

When she finished speaking, the Briton put on his arms and, after she had given him leave to depart, began to go at a walk through the wood. At length, as he was passing through a wild and lonely place, he came to a certain river of marvelous breadth and depth, with great waves in it, and because of the great height of its banks it was impossible for anyone to reach it. But as he rode along the edge of the bank he came to a bridge which was of gold and had one end fastened to each bank; the middle of it, however, rested in the water, and he could
see that it was so shaken that great waves often covered it. At the end of it which
the Briton was approaching thee was a knight of a ferocious aspect who was
sitting on a horse. The Briton greeted him courteously enough, but the knight
scorned to return the greeting and said, "Armed Briton, who come from such
distant regions, what are you seeking?"

The Briton answered, "I am trying to cross the river by the bridge;" and
the bridge keeper said, "Then you must be seeking death, which no stranger here
has been able to escape. But if you want to go back home and leave all you arms
here, I will take pity on your youth which has led you so rashly and so foolishly
into other men’s countries and into strange realms."

The Briton replied, "If I were to lay down my arms, you would gain little
credit for the victory of a man in arms over an unarmed man; but if you can keep
an armed man from going along the public way, then you may consider that your
victory has won you glory. If you do not make way peaceably for me to go across
the bridge, I shall simply try to force a passage with my sword."

When the bridge keeper heard that the young man was trying to force a
passage with his sword, he began to gnash his teeth, and he fell into a great rage
and said, "Young man, Britain sent you here in an evil hour, since you shall perish
by the sword in this wilderness, and you will never be able to bring back news of
the country to your lady. Woe to you, wretched Briton, who have not been afraid
to seek the place of your death at the persuasion of a woman!" Then spurring his
horse against the Briton he began to attack him with his sharp sword and to
hammer him so cruelly that one stroke, glancing off his shield, cut through two
fold of his hauberk and into the flesh of his side so that the blood commenced to
flow in abundance from the wound, directed the point of his lance at the knight of
the bridge, and with a mighty thrust pierced him through, bore him from his
horse, and stretched him shamefully upon the ground. But when the Briton was
about to smite off his head, the bridge keeper, by the most humble entreaties,
sought and obtained mercy.

But on the other side of the river there stood a man of tremendous size,
who seeing the bridge keeper overcome by the Briton and this same Briton
starting to cross the golden bridge, began to shake it so violently that much of the
time it was hidden by the waves. But the Briton, having great confidence in the
excellence of his horse, did not cease to press forward manfully over the bridge
and at length, after great difficulty and many duckings, he arrived at the farther
end of it by virtue of his horse's efforts; there he drowned beneath the water the
man who had been shaking the bridge and bound up the wound in his own side as
well as he could.

After this the Briton began to ride through very beautiful fields and after
he had ridden for about a mile the path came out into a pleasant meadow, fragrant
with all sorts of flowers. In this meadow was a palace, marvelously built in a
circular form and very beautifully decorated. He could not find a door anywhere
in the palace, nor could he see any inhabitants; but in the fields he found silver
tables, and on them were all sorts of food and drink set among the snow-white
napkins. In the same pleasant meadow was a shell of the purest silver in which
there was sufficient food and drink for a horse. He therefore drove his horse off
to feed, and he himself walked completely around the palace; but finding no sign
of any entrance to the dwelling or any evidence that the place was in habited, he
drew near to the table and, driven by his hunger, began ravenously to devour the
food he found there. A very little while after he had begun to eat, a door of the
palace opened quickly with such violence that the shock of it resounded like near-
by thunder, and suddenly out of this door came a man of gigantic size,
brandishing in his hands a copper club of immense weight which he shook like a
straw without the least effort. To the youth at the table he said, “What sort of man
are you, so presumptuous that you were not afraid to come to this royal place and
so coolly and disrespectfully to eat the food of the royal table of the knights?”

The Briton answered, “The royal table should be freely open to
everybody, and it is not proper that anybody should be refused the royal food and
drink. Moreover it is right for me to partake of the rations prepared for the
knights, since knighthood is my sole care and a knighthly task has brought me to
this place. You are therefore doubly discourteous in trying to forbid me the royal
table.”

To this the doorkeeper replied, “Although this is the royal table, it Is not
proper for anyone to eat at it except those who are assigned to this palace, and
they allow no one to go beyond this point unless he fights with the palace guards
and defeats them. And if anyone is beaten by them, there is no hope for him.
Therefore get up from the table and hurry back to where you belong, or tell me
that you want to fight your way onward and why you have come this far.”

The Briton said to him, “I am seeking the hawk’s gauntlet; that is why I
came. When I get it I shall try to go further and as victor in Arthur’s court take
the hawk. Where is this palace guard you mention who will keep me from going
on?"

“The doorkeeper replied, “You fool! What madness possesses you,
Briton! It would be easier for you to die and come to life again ten times than to
get those things you mention. I am the palace guard who will deprive you of your
reputation and spoil Britain of your youth. I am so strong that when I am angry
two hundred of the best knights of Britain can hardly withstand me.”

Then Briton answered, “Although you say you are very powerful, I would
like to fight with you to show you what sort of men Britain produces; however, it
isn’t proper for a knight to fight with a footman.”

The doorkeeper said to him, “I see that your bad luck has brought you to
death in this place where my right hand has felled more than a thousand. And
although I am not reckoned among the knights, I would like to fight with you
while you are on horseback, because then if you yield to that valor of a footman
you will have good reason to know what sort of person would be overcome by the
boldness of a man like me if I were on horseback.”

To this the Briton answered, “God forbid that I should ever fight on
horseback against a man on foot, for against a foot soldier every man should fight
on foot,” and grasping his arms he rushed bravely at the enemy before him and
with a blow of his sword slightly damaged the latter’s shield. The guardian of the
palace, greatly enraged at this and contemptuous of the Britain’s small size, shook
his brazen club so furiously that the Briton’s shield was almost shattered by the
concussion, and he himself was greatly terrified. Thinking that a second blow would finish the Briton, the guard raised his hand to strike again, but before the blow could fall the other quickly feinted and with his sword caught him on the arm, so that the right hand, still holding the club, fell to the ground. But as he was about to put an end to him, the guard cried out, "Are you the one discourteous knight that sweet Britain has produced, you would slay a wounded man? If you will spare my life I can easily get for you what you want, but without me you can gain nothing."

That Briton said, "Porter, I will spare your life if you will do what you promise."

The guard said, "Wait a bit and I will quickly get you the hawk's gauntlet."

The Briton answered, "You robber and deceiver of man! Now I see plainly that you are trying to cheat me. If you want to save your life just show me the place where that gauntlet of yours is kept."

The guard then led the Briton into the innermost part of the palace where there was a very beautiful golden column that held up the whole weight of the palace, and on this column hung the gauntlet he was seeking. As he grasped it boldly and held it firmly in his left hand he heard a great noise, and although he saw nobody, a wailing began to resound throughout the palace, and a cry, "Woe! Woe! In spite of us the victor enemy is carrying away the spoil."

He left the palace, and mounting his horse which was already saddled, continued his journey until he came to a delightful place where there were more of those beautiful fields filled with flowers, and in the fields was a palace finely built of gold. Its length was six hundred cubits, and its width two hundred. The
roof and all the outer walls were of silver, and the inside was all of gold set with precious stones. The palace was divided into a great many rooms, and in the hall of state King Arthur was sitting on a golden throne surrounded by beautiful women, more than I could count, and before him stood many splendid knights. In this palace was a beautifully fashioned golden perch on which was the hawk he was seeking, and chained near by lay two hawking dogs. But before he could get to the palace his way was blocked by a heavily fortified barbican, raised to protect the palace, and to the defense of it were assigned twelve very strong knights who permitted no one to pass unless he showed them the gauntlet for the hawk or forced his way sword in hand.

When the Briton saw them, he quickly showed them the gauntlet and they fell back saying, "Your life isn't safe if you go on this way; it will lead you to great trouble." But the Briton continued on to the interior of the palace and saluted King Arthur. When the knights pressed him to know why he had come here, he replied that he had come to carry off the hawk. One of the knights of the court asked him, "Why are you trying to get the hawk?" and he replied, "Because I enjoy the love of a more beautiful woman than any knight in this court has."
The other answered him, "Before you can take away the hawk you will have to fight to prove that statement." "Gladly!" said the Briton. After a suitable shield had been given him both took their places armed within the lists; setting spurs to their horses, they rushed together violently, shattering each other's shields and splintering their lances; then with their swords they smote each other and hewed to pieces the iron armor. After they had fought in this fashion for a long time, the
vision of the knight of the palace, whom the Briton had struck on the head with two shrewd blows in rapid succession, began to be so disturbed that he could see almost nothing. When the Briton perceived this, he leapt boldly upon him and quickly struck him from his horse. Then he seized the hawk, and, glancing as he did so at the two dogs, he saw a written parchment, which was fastened to the perch with a little gold chain. When he inquired carefully concerning this, he was told, "This is the parchment on which are written the rules of love which the King of Love himself, with his own mouth, pronounced for lovers. You should take it with you and you and make these rules known to lovers if you want to take away the hawk peaceably."

He took the parchment, and after he had been given courteous permission to depart, quickly returned, without any opposition, to the lady of the wood, who he found in the same place in the grove where she was when he first came upon her as he was riding along. She rejoiced greatly over the victory he had gained and dismissed him with these words, "Dearest friend, go with my permission, since sweet Britain desires you. But, that your departure may not seem too grievous to you, I ask you to come here sometimes alone, and you can always have me with you." He kissed her thirteen times over and went joyfully back to Britain. Afterwards he looked over the rules which he had found written in the parchment, and then, in accordance with the answer he had previously received, he made them known to all lovers. These are the rules.

I. Marriage is no real excuse for not loving.

II. He who is not jealous cannot love.
III. No one can be bound by a double love.

IV. It is well known that love is always increasing or decreasing.

V. That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish.

VI. Boys do not love until they arrive at the age of maturity.

VII. When one lover dies, a widowhood of tow years is required of the survivor.

VIII. No one should be deprived of love without the very best of reasons.

IX. No one can love unless he is impelled by the persuasion of love.

X. Love is always a stranger in the house of avarice.

XI. It is not proper to love any woman whom one should be ashamed to seek to marry.

XII. A true lover does not desire to embrace in love anyone except his beloved.

XIII. When made public love rarely endures.

XIV. The easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized.

XV. Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved.

XVI. When a lover suddenly catches sight of his beloved his heart palpitates.

XVII. A new love puts to flight an old one.

XVIII. Good characters alone makes any man worthy of love.

XIX. If love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives.

XX. A man in love is always apprehensive

XXI. Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love.

XXII. Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved.
XXIII. He whom the thought of love vexes, eats and sleeps very little.

XXIV. Every act of a lover ends in the thought of his beloved.

XXV. A true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved.

XXVI. Love can deny nothing to love.

XXVII. A lover can never have enough of the solaces of his beloved.

XXVIII. A slight presumption causes a lover to suspect his beloved.

XXIX. A man who is vexed by too much passion usually does not love.

XXX. A true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved.

XXXI. Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.
APPENDIX B

Modern English Translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

J.R.R. Tolkien

And in that kingdom of Britain have been wrought more gallant deeds than in any other;

but of all British kings Arthur was the most valiant, as I have heard tell,

therefore will I set forth a wondrous adventure that fell out in his time.

And if ye will listen to me, but for a little while,

I will tell it even as it stands in story stiff and strong,

fixed in the letter, as it hath long been known in the land.
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