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The Turn of the Shrew: Gendering the Power of Loquacity in *Othello*

Early modern patriarchal discourses continuously harp on the need to control women's mobility and their speech and the two are integrally linked. In his seminal essay "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" Peter Stallybrass points out, "The surveillance of women concentrated upon three specific areas: the mouth, chastity and the threshold of the house. These three areas were frequently collapsed into each other" (Stallybrass 126). Stallybrass' thesis explores the gendered implication of Bakhtinian notion of the "grotesque" body—an open unfinished transgressive entity (Bakhtin 26)—in early modern discourses. Stallybrass argues that Renaissance conduct book writers like Gouge, Whately and Snausel assume that woman's body "is *naturally* grotesque" (Stallybrass 126). The function of patriarchal discourse is to create a normative body by subjecting this *naturally* grotesque female body to surveillance and disciplining; its ultimate aim is to keep women enclosed within the "patriarchal territory."

Taking a cue from Stallybrass I use the term "female grotesque" as a conceptual category which provides remarkable insight into the phallogentric bias of discourses that posit naturalized links between the female and the grotesque. This implies that while certain form of female body and behaviour gets coded as "grotesque", the grotesque itself tends to be gendered as female. Following Mary Russo I argue that the "female grotesque" is crucial to "identity formation for both men and women as a space of risk and abjection" and thus does not "exclude male bodies or male subjectivities" (Russo 12). In such cases the identities of men as grotesque is produced through an association with the "feminine as the body marked by difference" (Russo 5).

This article explores the subversive potential of loquaciousness in *Othello*; it argues that both Iago and Emilia, in different stages of the play, may be understood as types of the "female grotesque"—as figures of "devalued difference" (Braidotti 80). It is crucial to inquire why loquacity, traditionally regarded as a typically female attribute, was perceived as a particularly threatening form of insubordination in the early modern period. Thus this paper begins with a brief account of early modern discourses about the treatment meted out to the shrew and its relation to the tongue's somatic significations, its identification as an "unruly" member. The next sections focus on the relation of power and gender that inform these discourses of loquaciousness and traces the different trajectories of its development in Iago and Emilia respectively.

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Discipline and punish: early modern discourses about taming the tongue

A scold, in a legal sense, is a troublesome and angry woman who, by her brawling and wrangling amongst her neighbours, “doth break the publick Peace and beget, cherish and increase publick discord” (Boose 248). Since shrewishness was viewed as a public form of offence that posed a threat to the patriarchal social order it became the state’s prerogative to subject the female body to ritual and social forms of punishment.

The punitive measure used most frequently was ducking or cucking; it involved a see-saw apparatus, with the offender strapped into a chair at one end, to be dunked into water that was most likely to be a horse-pond (Underdown 123; Boose 245).¹ Before the actual event of being ducked into the pond the offender was often ridden or carted through the town to the accompaniment of loud music before a mocking and jeering crowd (Boose 245). The ritual ceremony of the shrew being paraded before a public brings out the carnivalesque quality of a specifically gendered form of disciplining and punishment (Boose 249).² Shrew-taming stories are almost always generically classified as comedy the rituals of degradation and humiliation that the woman is made to undergo are presented as inherently amusing. From Noah’s wife of the Mystery plays to Katherine in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, the scold’s speech and behaviour are always shown as excessive, exaggerated and thus a subject of mirth.

Yet the problematic of the shrew and her taming is borne out by the gap that exists between the actual forms of physical and psychological brutality involved and its ideology of the comic. This is perhaps best brought out in the like the anonymous *A merry Ieste of a Shrewde and curste Wyfe lapped in Morrelles Skin* in which the groom drags the allegedly shrewish bride into a cellar, tears her clothes, beats her with birch rods and finally wraps her in the salted hide of Morel, a horse that he has killed for this purpose (Woodbridge 200).

The reference to the horse’s hide in the *A merry Ieste of a Shrewde and curste Wyfe lapped in Morrelles Skin* draws attention to the implicit connection between the breaking and bridling of a horse and the bridling of the shrewish bride that forms the crux of Petruchio’s taming of Kate in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (Woodbridge 206; Boose 258).³ As Lynda Boose notes:

In shrew-taming folktale plots in general, the taming of the unruly wife is frequently coincident with the wedding trip home on horseback. The trip, which is itself the traditional final stage to the “bridal” is already the site of an unspoken pun on bridle. (Boose 258)

In Grumio’s recounting of the incident to Curtis, Kate’s humiliation and shaming is a form of “horse play” that Petruchio has devised:

thou shouldst have heard how her horse fell and she under her horse; thou shouldst have heard in how miry a place, how she was bemoiled, how he left

¹ Boose observes that the cucking stool, which had been used in connection with marketplace offences became a gender specific punishment reserved for women in England in the fifteenth century.

² Boose also notes that the punishment meted out to the male offender—being pilloried in the town square—though physically more harsh “did not spectacularize or carnivalize the male body so as to degrade it to nearly the same extent.”

³ Both Woodbridge and Boose draw attention to the close links between *A Merry Jeste* and Shakespeare’s play, though the latter is less offensive than the earlier shrew-taming tales in its omission of physical brutality.

her with the horse upon her (...) how the horse's ran away, how her bridle was burst... (*The Taming of the Shrew* IV.i.65-72)

The clever punning on “bridle” allows the dramatist to allude—without ever making direct use of it in his shrew-taming story—to the “scold’s bridle” a contraption that was used to literally “tame” and silence the shrew’s tongue. According to the testimony of Dorothy Waugh who was punished by the Mayor for subversion of local authority with the scold’s bridle, it was a “steele cap” with “three bars of iron” that was locked to her head with a “peece” which was put into her mouth (Boose 265).

The origins of this specifically gendered form of punishment may be traced to the very nature and meaning of the tongue in the discourses of the early modern period. The most crucial of these was the tongue’s ontological significance; like the Latin *lingua* and Greek *glossa*, it also meant language and thus encoded “a relation between word and flesh, tenor and vehicle, matter and meaning” (Mazzio 1997: 54). Anxieties about the ambivalent power of language—that it could be both harmful and benevolent—got displaced on to the tongue whose inherent slipperiness was understood as the source of the duplicitous power of speech (Mazzio 54).

Writers of the period were acutely sensitive to the disruptive potential of what Erasmus termed the “flabby little organ” (Erasmus 323). It would be interesting to note the recurrence of terms like “taming” and “governance” with regard to the tongue in the numerous tracts, homilies and sermons of the period. To cite just three examples, Thomas Adams’ sermon was entitled *Taming of the Tongue* (1619), William Gearing and Richard Allestree’s treatises were called *A Bridle for the Tongue* (1663) and *The Government of the Tongue* (1674) respectively. Thomas Adams referred to it variously as the “unruly” or “wild” member, the “insubjectible subject”, the tongue was the “somatic manifestation of all that resists containment” (Mazzio 54).

From the perspective of the culture’s sexual politics, the most significant implications of the somatic peculiarities of the tongue are to be found in anatomical and medical texts. By focusing on the tongue’s muscular structure, mobility and apparent will of its own, such discourses compare it with the other “unruly” member—the penis.

Anxieties and fantasies of women possessing the virile, “unruly member” and thus establishing their social, political and sexual dominance is explicitly staged in Thomas Tomkis’ university play *Lingua: Or the Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses for Superiority* (1607). *Lingua*, or tongue, is represented as a woman in scarlet dress flitting in and out of the cosmic mouth. Her words and actions—she wants to be granted the privilege and dignity of one of the senses—call attention to her status as a flamboyant and flagrantly subversive member whose status in the final indictment is that she is “non sense”. Moreover, the dramatist foregrounds her sexual transgressiveness by playing on the word *lie*; *Lingua* follows her initial tall claims about her unspotted chastity with the admission that she is “wont to lie” (Mazzio 66).

Lingua’s pun on “lie” is the crux of Desdemona’s tragedy in *Othello*⁴ which is based on the dangerous potential of such double entendre. The play on “lie” is introduced in a light comical vein in Act III Scene iv with Desdemona asking the clown if he knows “where the Lieutenant Cassio lies?” (III.iv.1). The clown’s wisecracks look forward to the pernicious play on “lies” that constitutes Iago’s *modus operandi* in Act IV, Scene i, as he torments Othello about Cassio’s disclosure in his dreams about his sexual liaison with Desdemona. To Othello’s question regarding what Cassio may have said (IV.i.31) he embarks on a strategy of

⁴ All textual citations from *Othello*, ed. M. R. Ridley, in the series *The Arden Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

pauses and omissions, with a hint that certain things are unutterable (IV. i. 31). To Othello's anxious query, "But what?" he replies with a single enigmatic word, "lie" (IV.i.33), intended to tease Othello and further arouse his jealous suspicion. Though Othello strenuously attempts to stress the crucial distinction between "Lie with her" and "lie on her" (IV.i.35-6), it is clear that the bewitching power of Iago's rhetoric is his equivocation, "With her, on her, what you will" (IV.i.34). This exchange between Iago and Othello establish that the former's famous slipperiness stems from what early modern writers understood as the dangerous potential of the slippery tongue and its ability to *literally* affect lives from a distance.⁵

In this context, it is also interesting to note that in the discourses of the period, the power of the mobile tongue was linked to its ability to disturb social and political order—an idea expressed through the personification of tongues as porters, midwives, footmen, horses and women. These were groups whose function was to serve the members of the upper echelons of society, but which were potentially unruly. The rhetorical strategy thus emphasized the always-already subversive quality of the tongue (Mazzio 58).

As Othello's "ancient" or ensign, Iago not only belongs to this socially subordinate group; his speech curiously evokes images of midwifery. He refers to his lies / concoctions as "monstrous births" that he, as an agent of "hell and night", will assist in bringing "to the world's light" (I.iii.401-2). Later at the quayside he refers to his "inventions" (II.i.125) as the birth pangs of his "labouring muse" who delivers his acerbic witticisms (II.i.127-8). The allusions to a midwife serve as a pointer to Iago's role as a "gossip" in the play. Like the midwife the gossip denoted a woman whose unbridled tongue had great subversive potential. The section argues that Iago's obsessive concern with the fabled linguistic wantonness of the female tongue is linked to his own perception of social powerlessness. His status as a malcontent aligns him to the feminine and his own revulsion at this feminization expresses itself through a virulent misogyny.

A gossiping husband and a silent shrew: reversing gender roles in *Othello*

In the early modern period the one condition of female loquaciousness that was acknowledged as socially necessary (though not entirely approved) was that of the gossip. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary notes that the etymology of the term "gossip" is the Old English "godsib" which meant "godfather or godmother", "literally a person related to one in God". However, by the sixteenth century it became a thoroughly gendered and slightly pejorative term, used exclusively in connection with women. In their marital conduct book, *A Godly Form of Household Government* (1598), Robert Dod and John Cleaver recognize gossiping as a form of feminine social networking necessary for the "law of good neighbourhood", but warn explicitly against its excesses:

She that much frequenteth meetings of gossips seldom cometh better home. Some count it a disgrace to come much abroad, lest they should be counted gossips, which name has become odious: but they must have tattlers come home to them to bring them news and to hold them in a tale, lest they should be thought to be idle without a cause. (Aughterson 79)

⁵ Thomas Adams, comparing the power of the hand and the tongues says "The hand spares to hurt the absent, the tongue hurts all (...). The hand reacheth but a small compasse, the tongue goes through the world." Richard Allestree similarly draws attention to the power of the tongue to pervade and affect almost anything in the universe: 'so unboundedly mischievous is that petulant member, that heaven and earth are not wide enough for its range, but it will find work at home too.' (Mazzio 1995:57).

“To hold them in a tale” seems to sum up Iago’s function vis-à-vis the characters in *Othello*. However, unlike Dod and Cleaver’s gossips, who bring tales home to housewives, Iago is ubiquitous. Like his mobile tongue that darts in and out of his mouth, Iago’s tales also negotiate the dialectics of the home and the world. In the famous opening scene of *Othello* it is in the street of Venice that Iago gossips about the mishap within Brabantio’s household. He instructs Roderigo to raise a noisy outcry, beneath Brabantio’s window (I.i.67-77) and produces voyeuristic fictions of an “old black ram” “tupping” Brabantio’s “white ewe” (I.i.88-9). He arouses Brabantio’s racist and patriarchal anxieties: “you’ll have your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse” (I.i.110-11). Towards the end of the play, he gossips to Cassio about Bianca, telling him, “she gives it out that you shall marry her” (IV.i.115); he doesn’t fail to add that this is the talk of the town in Cyprus, “Faith, the cry goes, you shall marry her” (IV.i.123). In between, he re-presents the Othello-Desdemona relationship to the gullible and heartbroken Roderigo as an exotic tale about “an erring barbarian” (I.iii.356) and a sexually insatiable “super-subtle Venetian” (I.iii.357), assuring him that the marriage will not last. To Othello he plays the role of a gossip, who has intimate knowledge of how sexually lascivious Venetian wives conduct themselves:

I know our country disposition well;
 In Venice they do let God see the pranks
 They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
 Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown.
 (III. iii. 205-8)

The subversive potential of the gossip, licensed to infiltrate the enclosed space of the home, is underscored by Dod and Cleaver who note that the “great tale bearers be as great carriers” and their occupation is “but to mark and carry” (Aughterson 80). In the senate Iago is quick to “mark” Brabantio’s misogynist warning before he departs: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see / She has deceiv’d her father, and may thee” (I.iii.292-3). He “carries” this almost verbatim to Othello:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;
 And when she seem’d to shake and fear your looks,
 She lov’d them most
 (III.iii.210-12)

If gossiping, or carrying tales, is indeed a feminine occupation, then what are the implications of Iago’s monstrous appropriation of this role? Why, indeed, does Iago need to play what Dod and Cleaver term, “such games of carrying and recarrying”? (Aughterson 80). My submission is that Iago’s preoccupation with “gossiping”—a specifically feminine attribute—has to be understood in the light of the gendered dimension of the malcontent’s lack of power.

Iago’s status as the stage malcontent is established in the opening scene of the play; he is a man who knows his price and is confident that he is “worth no worse a place” (I.i.11) than that of a lieutenant. He has given “proof” of his military abilities to his master by accompanying him to battlefields, “At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds, / Christian and heathen” (I.i.28-30). Yet, the Moor has elected Michael Cassio, a man, “That never set a squadron in the field, / Nor the division of a battle knows, / More than a spinster” (I.i.22-4) as his lieutenant. Relegated to the rank of “his worship’s ancient” (I.i.33) Iago despises Othello and expresses his resentment through a mocking mimicry of the Moor’s voice of power (I.i.16-17).

Following Peter Stallybrass' observation that the malcontent is "the most notable practioner of the artifices of the powerless" (Stallybrass 134), it may be argued that Iago's appropriation of the function of the gossip—the familiar, intimate but deeply subversive feminine role—is an expression of his powerless condition as a malcontent. Indeed his continual "improvisation," his relentless role-playing and manipulation of others) may be understood as the "artifices of the powerless" (Greenblatt 233-5). Stallybrass draws attention to the "structural dependency" that the malcontent shares with the lady: "For like the woman he despises, he is bought by the highest bidder; like them his only role is service." (Stallybrass 134). The observations are particularly pertinent for malcontents like Bosola and Iago. Iago interprets his marginalized status not as exceptional but contingent on the very nature of service, its "curse" where "Preferment goes by letter and affection" (I.i.35-6). Consequently, Iago subversively undermines the ideology of service: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (I.i.42). He expresses contempt for the "duteous and knee-crooking knaves" (I.i.45) and upholds those who throw "shows of service on their lords" (I.i.52) and "Do themselves homage" (I.i.54). Early in the play, Roderigo's peevish accusations to Iago of not fulfilling his part of the deal clearly indicate that one of Iago's roles is as that of a paid informant:

Tush, never tell me! I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.
(I.i.1-3)

His revulsion at his own feminized powerlessness is expressed through the displaced abjection of women. His contempt for the artifices practiced by those who lack power leads him to denounce women's ability to deceive and dissemble, to hide their sexual lasciviousness. Hence he creates a fiction of Desdemona having practiced witchcraft to ensnare Othello:

She that so young could give out such a seeming,
To seal her father's eyes up, close as oak,
He thought 'twas witchcraft
(III.iii.213-215)

In a perverse twist of logic, Iago incriminates Desdemona as the witch who is at heart a whore. The effectiveness of Iago's "scripting" of Desdemona as a whore is expressed in Othello's later anguished question to his wife: "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book / Made to write "whore" upon?" (IV.ii.73-4). Indeed, it is crucial to Iago's own project of financial gain that Desdemona be constructed as a whore. Thus he assures Roderigo that "thou shalt enjoy her" (I.iii.358-9). His power to "trash" Roderigo, "this poor trash of Venice" (II.i.298) is that he can convince Roderigo that Desdemona, whom he idealizes and adores, is available for sexual purchase. Roderigo, whose conception of his aristocratic ladylove oscillates between her role as a goddess and a whore, sends Desdemona jewels through Iago. Firm in his conviction that such gifts would corrupt a votarist (IV.ii.189), he believes Iago's lies that "she has receiv'd 'em" (IV.ii.190) and hopes in return to gain her sexual favours (IV.ii.191-2).

Iago's ability to manipulate others through his fictions is fascinating also because of the paradoxical position that he occupies in the play. As a malcontent he shares the status of other Shakespearean lower-order characters like Shylock, Malvolio, Edmund, or Caliban yet, his is a particularly dangerous and powerful 'scripting from below" (Sinfield 807). As Peter Stallybrass has observed, Iago is convincing—not merely to Othello, but to Brabantio, Roderigo and Cassio—"because his is the voice of 'common sense', the ceaseless repetition

of the always already known, the culturally given” (Stallybrass 139). He voices Venetian society’s deeply racist and sexist ideology of power. Iago’s strategies of fiction-making are based on his acute perception of what constitutes culture’s “common sense”—that black men possess excessive and monstrous sexual drives, that women are inherently deceitful, sexually lascivious and inconstant.

At the quayside in Cyprus, Iago’s riddles about female nature end with the sly formulation that even the paragon of virtue and beauty (II.i.147-57) is fit only “To suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (II.i.160). Iago’s fictions of feminine sexual frailty, folly and duplicity are pernicious because they are not merely an acerbic individual’s warped notions of women. Using the rhetoric of proverbial sayings, delivered as couplets, Iago’s “invention” (II.i.125) constitutes the culture’s prevailing common sense “truths” about female nature and character. When Desdemona dismisses Iago’s words playfully as “old paradoxes, to make fools laugh i’ the alehouse” (II.i.138-9), she underestimates the damaging, indeed, lethal power of such prattle. It is because Iago is aware that his subversive power lies in his ability to manipulate others through the use of his tongue that his anxious misogyny expresses itself, transferring its power to women, by categorizing his wife as a “shrew”.

Emilia’s first appearance in the play, at the quayside in Cyprus, presents the audience with a puzzle: is this woman a shrew or a submissive wife? It is Iago, authorized to label almost all the characters in *Othello*, who categorizes his wife Emilia as a shrew—the culture’s most enduring stereotype of female “unruliness”. In a lewd sneering comment addressed to Cassio, Iago says:

Sir, would she give you so much of her lips
As of her tongue she has bestow’d on me,
You’ld have enough

(II.i.100-2)

Iago’s crass misogynist joke—the first of a long series that will ensue—is in response to Cassio’s disclaimer as he kisses Emilia welcome (II.i.97-99). Even when Desdemona points out that Emilia hardly speaks (II.i.103) Iago stresses his husbandly prerogative, insisting that he alone has privileged access to the truth about Emilia’s behaviour:

I know, too much:
I find it, I; for when I ha’list to sleep—
Marry, before your ladyship, I grant,
She puts her tongue a little in her heart,
And chides with thinking.

(II.i.102-7)

Iago’s vignette of his marital discord is pegged exclusively on his wife’s use or misuse of her tongue. It both derives from and feeds into early modern patriarchal discourses that regard female speech as the ultimate locus of insubordination. According to the same logic a liberal or “loose” tongue also tropes an incontinent female body. Singled out as a shrew or scold, Emilia also becomes a “common” woman or a potential whore. Iago’s punningly pronounced “Come on come on” in his four line misogynist type-casting of women drives home this point; possessing “common” frailties, women are by implication sexually available or “common” (II.i.109-12). Throughout this scene, while Iago humiliates Emilia by attempting to turn her into the comic stereotype of the shrewish wife, she protests just twice: You ha’ little cause to say so” (II.i.108) and “You shall not write my praise” (II.i.116). Emilia’s tongue-tiedness confirms the truth of Desdemona’s observation, “Alas! She has no speech.” (II.i.102).

What, one wonders, are the implications of Emilia's reticence? Is it meant to expose Iago's accusations of her shrewishness as his "invention" (II.iii.125)? Or is Emilia's silence an indication that she is the submissive, obedient, good wife, modeled on the ideal created in homilies on marriage and domesticity? Perhaps the conspicuous disjunction between Iago's insistence on Emilia's role as a shrew and her reticence drives home the double-bind of the calumniated wife; for Emilia to speak at this juncture would merely confirm Iago's slander—that she is indeed the scold—yet by not protesting she ends up colluding in Iago's myths about herself. Indeed Emilia's function in this scene seems to fulfil the ultimate masculine fantasy of controlling women's tongues. Even the classic shrew-tamer Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* can only display his "aweful rule and right supremacy" (*The Taming of the Shrew*, V.ii.114) by making Katherine discourse at length on her wifely submission (V.ii.141-84). This articulation problematizes the issue, since the very act of voicing subversively undermines the very project of silencing the shrew. In contrast Iago's strategies effectively reduce Emilia into an oxymoron: the silent shrew.

"Alas! She has no speech" and "I am bound to speak": Emilia's transformation

In the first half, the play casts Emilia as a woman who has subdued her critical faculties and will to her abusive and wily husband; the apotheosis of this is Act II, Scene iii, when she picks up the handkerchief that Desdemona has dropped. In a telling passage that reveals her willing suspension of disbelief, coupled with an attempt to absolve herself of the responsibilities of an active knowing agent, she says:

What he'll do with it
Heaven knows, not I,
I nothing know, but for his fantasy.

(III.iii.301-3)

The sequence of words "not I / I nothing" is a fascinating chiasmus linking disavowal of knowledge with female self-effacement although the repeated I's inscribe the self as a repressed moral agent. Yet in the last scene of the play the very same Emilia, despite her husband's command to be silent, defiantly declares, "I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak" (V.ii.185). She emerges as the play's most powerful voice critiquing the patriarchal ideology of wifely behaviour: "But I do think it is their husband's faults / If wives do fall" (IV.iii.86-7). This paper on the female grotesque in *Othello* attempts to explore the enigma of Emilia—her transformation from a silent submissive wife to a woman who is "all speech" (Grennan 291).

Emilia's behaviour is all the more striking in contrast to Desdemona's transformation. The latter becomes more and more "enclosed" within the "patriarchal territory"—she endures Othello's insult and physical abuse (IV.i.235), his accusation that she is a whore (IV.ii.73-88) and yet states that her love "doth so approve him" that even "his checks and frowns" "have grace and favour in them" (IV.iii.19, 20, 21). Emilia on the other hand plays a crucial role in the play's denouement by unmasking her "honest" husband and denouncing him as a liar: "You told a lie, an odious damned lie; / Upon my soul, a lie, a wicked lie!" (V.ii.181-2.). In the last scene of *Othello*, Emilia's act is clearly transgressive—she challenges the patriarchal injunction to maintain wifely obedience and silence: "Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak / 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now" (V.ii.196-7).

Any attempt to read the Emilia of Act IV and V in terms of plausibility and causality, fails totally just as Desdemona's transformation from the spunky assertive and self-confident young woman into a calumniated and submissive wife does not follow the dictates of

psychological consistency of character development. In his reading of Desdemona's role in *Othello*, Stallybrass writes:

Desdemona (...) fulfills two different functions. The Desdemona of the first half of the play is an active agent (...). She is accordingly given the freedom we tend to associate generically with the comic heroine (...). It is only when Desdemona becomes the object of surveillance that she is reformed within the problematic of the enclosed body. In other words the play constructs two different Desdemonas: the first a woman capable of "downright violence" (I.iii.249) and the second "A maiden never bold" (I.iii.94). (Stallybrass 141)

The play likewise constructs two different Emilias: the first a woman who "has no speech" (II.i.103) and the second who "is bound to speak" (V.ii.185) despite her husband's injunctions, "charm your tongue" (V.ii.184). The shift parallels that of the two different Desdemonas but in the exactly opposite direction. It is therefore crucial to examine those occasions in which the audience can sense the emergence of Emilia's subversive agency and explore the possible sources of oppositional selfhood. Feminist critics like Carol Neely have argued that the women's agency stem from their participation in "female discourse", which emerges from social interaction amongst women (Neely 7). The only occasion in the play when Desdemona and Emilia participate in the production of an exclusively "female discourse" is in Act IV Scene iii.

Desdemona and Emilia: A tale of two housewives

As Emilia "unpins" Desdemona, the two women engage in feminine chitchat that provides the play's counter-discourse on heterosexual relationships. The scene has been read as a celebration of the quotidian, and an affirmation of female bonding made all the more poignant since the two women are soon to be murdered by their respective husbands (Grennan 277). Yet a close reading reveals that Desdemona, the anxious and melancholy mistress, and Emilia, the aggrieved female attendant, speak in entirely different registers on issues of marital fidelity, female chastity and honour. As a Venetian lady who has led a cloistered existence Desdemona fails to conceive of the possibility of the infidelity of wives: "Dost thou in conscience think,—tell me, Emilia,— / That there be women do abuse their husbands / In such gross kind?" (IV.iii.59-60). Emilia, evidently a woman of the world, affirms the existence of such wives: "There be some such, no question" (IV.iii.61). To Desdemona's query "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" (IV.iii.62). Emilia does a tongue-in-cheek debunking of women's chastity and marital fidelity: "The world's a huge thing; it is a great price / For a small vice" (IV.iii.67-8) and then, "Ud's pity, who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?" (IV.iii.74-5). Desdemona responds with a moral recoil (IV.iii.75-6). The scene, which ends with Emilia's impassioned speech vindicating female frailty (IV.iii.84-103) widens the chasm that separates the two women. Instead of being united in their gender identities—women as same—they are deeply divided in terms of their class positions—emphasizing patriarchy's construction of women as different. In his reading of the scene, Kenneth Burke suggests that Emilia occupies a "low" position vis-à-vis Desdemona high and "noble" status; she serves as a contrast to highlight Desdemona's role as a tragic heroine who will always choose the more difficult path (Burke 185).

Clearly, this scene raises doubts about Emilia's oppositional female selfhood, a role resulting from a shared discourse among women. An alternative would be to trace the roots of Emilia's dissidence to her low marginal position both in her marriage and within the play's social structure or system. Indeed Emilia is a perfect counterpart of her husband Iago in sharing the structural position of the malcontent. Emilia's impassioned defense of the frailties

of wives is strongly reminiscent of Shylock's retort to the Christians when he is asked to show mercy in court; reminding them that they treat their slaves as abjectly as their asses, dogs and mules because "you bought them" his logic is that Antonio's "pound of flesh" is similarly "dearly bought" and "he will have it" (*The Merchant of Venice*, IV.i.90-100). Emilia's role as the play's female malcontent is evident in the several instances in which her subversive rhetoric uncannily echoes those of Iago. As an example, one could cite her speech about demystification of desire in marriage:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man;
They are all but stomachs, and we are all but food;
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,
They belch us

(III.iv.100-3)

The metaphorical transformation of women into food for male sexual appetite is reminiscent of Iago's debunking account of the "changeable" Moor who will soon lose his appetite for Desdemona: "The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coloquintida." (I.iii.349-50). Like Iago it is Emilia who introduces the motif of sexual jealousy to Desdemona. Attempting to assuage Desdemona's anxiety, Emilia evokes the "monster" image to refer to the irrationality of male sexual jealousy: "They are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself" (III.iv.155-6), reminding the audience / reader of Iago's mock warning to Othello about jealousy: "O beware, my lord, of jealousy / It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on" (III.iii.167-9). Speaking in the same linguistic register of common sense, sharing the malcontent's ideological demystification of erotic relationships, it is Emilia who ceaselessly deconstructs, from within, Iago's language "that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order" (Sinfield 809).

"Woman's poor revenge / That lies in her tongue": Emilia's resistance

Following this, my final submission is that Emilia's transformation can best be interpreted in terms of what Patricia Parker identifies as the play's preoccupation with the complex and multivalent usage of "dilation" (Parker, 1985: 54-74). Parker notes that during the Renaissance the term "dilate" was a "curious combination of (...) dilation, expansion, or dispersal (...) but also postponement in time," hence narrative dilation (especially in romance) was also connected with "delay" (Parker, 1999: 250). She also draws attention to the close links in Renaissance rhetoric between "dilation"—"to speak at large of anything" and "delation"—"occult and secret accusations" especially as it pertained to indictments. Since "to delate" is used in dictionaries as a variant spelling of "to dilate" (Parker, 1985: 55) dilation could also be read as delation. Thus Parker postulates that "dilation" was a "freighted term suggestive of amplification, accusation and delay" and is integral to the play's much-debated issues of gender and power and the unfolding of the tragedy (Parker, 1985: 56). Parker's essay draws attention to the "crossing of rhetorical, judicial and temporal within the structure of "dilation" (Parker, 1985: 58) in *Othello* through a brilliant close reading of the play. However, it does not explore the feminist potential embedded in such textual deconstructive reading. Yet, as Parker herself points out, the term dilation has strong associations with the "figures of the feminine" (Parker, 1999: 251) since the Latin *dilatatio* or dilation is a translation of the Hebrew Rahab, the name of the biblical harlot of Jericho, which means "wide" or "broad" (Parker, 1999: 249-50). Drawing heavily upon Parker's analysis, my thesis argues that Emilia's enigma—her initial silence which is transformed into a powerful voice critiquing

patriarchal sexist ideology—may be related to the gendered implication of the multiple meanings of dilation / delation in *Othello*.

Like Iago's wit, which depends on "dilatory time" (II.iii.363) the dramatist employs the "dilatory" tactics of delay to exploit the effectiveness of Emilia's presence. The play begins with an amplification or dilation of Emilia only after it is more than half way through. This meaning of amplification as an "'unfolding' of something at first hermetically 'wrapt up' or closed" (Parker, 1985: 59) is connected to the delayed opening-up of the silent shrew's mouth. Thus though there are sporadic instances of Emilia's voice in the play during Act III, the first major instance of the specifically feminine implication of "dilation"—of women's proverbial *copia verborum* invoked by Iago in the beginning of the play—is Emilia's discourse on female chastity, honour and the role of husbands in marriage (IV.iii.82-99).

Henceforth, Emilia's narrative dilation reflects primarily its meaning as delation, or legal accusations deployed to defend Desdemona against Othello's slander that his wife is a whore. In Act IV Scene ii after Othello has hurled accusations of sexual promiscuity and infidelity at her Desdemona's response is one of shocked incredulity: "Am I that name Iago?" (IV.ii.117.) Othello's slander becomes a kind of unutterable horror, "such as she says my lord did say I was?" (IV.ii.118.) In contrast to the tongue-tied Desdemona Emilia gains a linguistic fulsomeness:

He called her a whore; a beggar in his drink
 Could not have laid such terms upon his callat
 (IV.ii.119-20)

In a moment of dramatic irony Emilia dilates upon the very "circumstances" that Iago had earlier used to convince Othello of Desdemona's erring nature (III.iii.232-37). As proof of Desdemona's commitment and fidelity:

Hath she forsook so many noble matches,
 Her father, and her country, all her friends,
 To be call'd whore? Would it not make one weep?
 (IV.ii.124-6)

She goes on to pose crucial queries about the plausibility of Othello's charges against Desdemona, demanding that he produce the "circumstances" of such accusations. What Emilia is demanding are proofs or what in legal rhetoric is called "circumstantial evidence":

Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?
 What place, what time, what form, what likelihood?
 (IV.ii.139-40)

In stating that it is not enough merely to accuse a woman of sexual infidelity, but one must have adequate reason and proof for doing so, Emilia is using the strategy of delation as legal indictment. Emilia's intuitive understanding of human nature, in particular Othello's character, and the probable scenario of his having been duped is brought out in her astute assessment, "The Moor's abus'd by some outrageous fellow; / Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow" (IV.ii.141-42). Immediately after this she pronounces the punishment fit for such creatures:

And put in every honest hand a whip,
 To lash the rascal naked through the world
 Even from east to the west. (IV.ii.144-6)

In the play's last act dilation and delation are explicitly linked to what patriarchal discourses qualified as acts of female transgression. Emilia's resolution to speak in public is in defiance of patriarchal norms of proper feminine behaviour; if silence (the closed mouth) and containment within the household are signs of the obedient woman than Emilia epitomizes the transgressive and grotesque wife. It is the dilation of her mouth (her refusal to be silent) and her delation (accusations and charges) that frustrate Iago's attempts at "keeping dilation—in both senses—under strict control" (Parker, 1985: 68). Indeed the narrative and dramatic "closure" that Iago attempts to ensure for his plot is continually thwarted by female "disclosures".

Charging Iago with telling a "lie, an odious damned lie" (V.ii.180) about Desdemona's sexual liaison with Cassio, Emilia declares "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak" (V.ii.183). Iago's angry and exasperated injunction "What are you mad? I charge you get you home" (V.ii.193) is an attempt to put his unruly wife back to the place where she rightfully belongs, to have her silenced and enclosed within the household. Emilia's awareness that she is committing a willful act of transgression with dangerous consequences is clear in her acknowledgement, "'Tis proper I obey him, but not now/ Perchance Iago, I will ne'er go home" (V.ii.195-6). In response to Iago's "Zounds, hold your peace" (V.ii.217) she declares:

'Twill out, it will: I hold my peace sir, no,
I'll be in speaking, liberal as the air,
Let heaven, and men, and devils, let 'em all,
All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.
(V.ii.220-223)

In proclaiming that she will be "liberal" Emilia subversively appropriates a term used to denote women's lasciviousness in sexist discourses. As Othello tells Desdemona, her hot and moist hand is a sign of her sexually fallible nature—her "liberal heart" (III.iv.34)—and it requires "A sequester from liberty" (III.iv.36).

Emilia not only refuses to be contained within patriarchal "closures" but also plays a crucial role the play's two most significant public "disclosures". The first concerns Desdemona's murder: "I care not for thy sword—I'll make thee known, / Though I lost twenty lives. Help, help, O help!/ The Moor has kill'd my mistress. Murder, murder!" (V.ii.164-6). The second is the revelation of the "truth" about the Desdemona's lost handkerchief:

O thou dull Moor, that handkerchief thou speakest of
I found by fortune and did give my husband,
For often with a solemn earnestness—
More than indeed belonged to such a trifle—
He begged me to steal it.
(V.ii.223-7)

Emilia's courage and outspokenness—she is acting as a kind of witness for the state—does not guarantee her immunity; she is stabbed by Iago from behind in the scuffle that ensues. Though Emilia dies by her husband's hand to protect the honour of her calumniated mistress the difference in the manner of their deaths is marked. Othello strangles the chaste and silent Desdemona in the privacy of a bedchamber—the ultimate locus of patriarchal territory. Iago murders his unruly, "liberal" wife in a public space, in full view. While Desdemona's death valorizes her status as the tragic victim Emilia's ignominious murder a

fitting end for the transgressive female grotesque who breaks the boundaries of the patriarchal territory.

From her position as the repressed and silent “shrew” Emilia is transformed into the play’s unruly female with an unbridled tongue. Displaying character traits of the malcontent licensed to critique “dominant” ideology, she critiques patriarchal constructions of female lasciviousness, openly chastises Othello for his folly of murdering his chaste wife and denounces her own husband Iago. Emilia’s transgressions are those of linguistic fulsomeness and are linked to the text’s pervasive engagement with the strategies and multiple meanings of dilation. By overturning the misogynist stereotype of female loquacity Emilia embodies the power of the untamed Shakespearean shrew.

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