

**#METOO AND THE MOOR:  
RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF CINTHIO'S  
THE MOOR OF VENICE  
AND  
SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO**

The #MeToo Movement changed the optics of consent in cross-cultural adaptations of original stories. This comparison of Giraldi Cinthio's (1565) *The Moor of Venice* in Decade 3, Novella 7, in Part 1 of *Gli Hecatommithi* and Shakespeare's (1603) *Othello* reinterprets the role of consent in treatments of Disdemona/Desdemona and the Ensign's wife/Emilia. How do power dynamics in platonic friendship and marriage affect a woman's right to exercise consent in these stories? Lust for Disdemona motivates the Ensign in *The Moor of Venice*, but loss of rank and position outrank lust as prime movers that incite Iago to provoke Othello's deadly, jealous rage. Accordingly, domestic abuse, theft, and murder further affect status in their platonic friendships and marriages, which, in turn, influences their agency to take action and make decisions.

What these female characters say and don't say, and what they do and do not do, affects how women are viewed in Cinthio's *The Moor of Venice* and Shakespeare's *Othello* in the Italian and English contexts. In both stories, Disdemona/Desdemona sacrifices herself and remains loyal to the Moor. In *The Moor of Venice*, the Ensign's wife denies warning signs; her lack of interference in the Ensign's plans results in dire consequences. At the Moor's behest, Iago beats and kills Disdemona with a sack of sand. Contrariwise, Emilia is one of Shakespeare's most vocal women. Emilia demands and obtains entry into Othello and Desdemona's bedchamber. However, her efforts to save her mistress from Othello's smothering inadvertently lead to their murders. By understanding who consents to what, and when consent is given or withheld, Cinthio's tale and Shakespeare's adaptation reveal consequences of action and speech.

## Marriage

Early Modern sensibilities shaped husbandly expectations of their wives. The status of each wife influenced the degree to which the wives of the Moor and the Ensign/ Ancient [the third-ranking officer] had the right to consent. Disdemona/Desdemona defies her powerful Venetian father to elope with the Moor in Cinthio's story and Shakespeare's play. In *The Moor of Venice*, Cinthio underscored her choice: Disdemona «consented to marry the Moor...their affection was so mutual...they lived in such harmony and peace in Venice that no word ever passed between them that was not affectionate and kind»<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Othello illustrates his courtship and Desdemona defends her elopement before the Venetian Signoria:

My noble father  
I do perceive here a divided duty:  
but here's my husband,  
And so much duty as my mother show'd  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord<sup>2</sup>.

Disdemona/Desdemona consent to elope with the Moor against her father's wishes. When the Signoria commission Othello to command in the Cypriot war, Disdemona/Desdemona volunteer and insist upon accompanying the Moor/Othello. Even as Cinthio's tale, Disdemona asserts, «I will accompany you whitherso'er you go»<sup>3</sup> Desdemona pleads with the Signoria: «Let me go with him» (1.3.277)<sup>4</sup>. No doubt Disdemona/Desdemona consented to marry and accompany the Moor.

Strikingly, while the Venetian Signoria gave the right to choose to Desdemona, the Ensign's Wife/Emilia lacked the right to choose. The Ensign/Ancient agrees to deploy. In *The Moor of Venice*, the unnamed Ensign's Wife lacks the opportunity to consent. Yet, Cinthio acknowl-

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- 1 GIRALDI CINTHIO, «The Moor of Venice» in *Hecatommiti*, Book III. Translated by J.E. Taylor, In parentheses Publication, Cambridge and Ontario 2000, line 9.
  - 2 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. «Othello, the Moor of Venice.» in *The Oxford Shakespeare*, Edited by W. J. CRAIG, Oxford University Press, London 1914, 1.3.201-2, 206-10.
  - 3 CINTHIO, 36.
  - 4 SHAKESPEARE

edged that the Ensign's Wife is either happy to go or accepts her fate: "This man had likewise taken with him his wife to Cyprus, a young, and fair, and virtuous lady; and being of Italian birth she was much loved by Disdemona, who spent the greater part of every day with her» (1.3.315-19)<sup>5</sup>. Dissimilarly, after the Signioria depart, Othello entreats Iago to take care of Desdemona: "Honest Iago, / I prithee, let thy wife attend on her; / And bring them after in the best advantage»<sup>6</sup>. The lower status of the wife of the Ensign and Emilia, Iago's wife, results in having less say about their futures. Thus, rank and status of the husband determines the wife's ability to choose whether to stay in Venice or accompany her husband to the Cypriot war.

### Influence and Reinstatement

When explicit consent is not available in patriarchal societies, women often wield soft power to influence decisions. When the Captain/Lieutenant Cassio strikes guards with his sword, the Moor/Othello demotes the subordinates. Compassion for the Captain/Lieutenant Cassio motivates Disdemona/Desdemona to continually lobby for the Moor/Othello to reinstate the Captain/Lieutenant Cassio. Instead, the Moor/Othello rewards the noblewoman's repeated attempts to encourage her husband to reinstate the Captain/Cassio with death. By exercising their rights to speak, Disdemona/Desdemona's use of soft power inadvertently leads to their deaths.

In Cinthio's tale, Disdemona's «deep[ ] grie[f]» inspires her to «importune» her husband<sup>7</sup>. Her attempt to «pacify» the Moor «enraged» him<sup>8</sup>. Disdemona's failure to mollify her husband leads her to trivialize his anger and attribute his jealousy to his race: «Nay, but you Moors are of so hot a nature that every little trifle moves you to anger and revenge»<sup>9</sup>. Fearing his anger, Disdemona backpedal with «timidness» and attribute her actions to «good intent»; she vow «never [to] speak a word more on the subject»<sup>10</sup>. Despite Disdemona's promise to desist, the Moor

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5 CINTHIO, 55-8.

6 SHAKESPEARE

7 CINTHIO, 86-8

8 CINTHIO, 98-9, 111.

9 Ivi, 108-10.

10 Ivi, 115-17.

subsequently complains to the Ensign about «the earnestness with which his wife again pleaded for the Captain»<sup>11</sup>. After the Ensign incites the Moor's jealousy, he wounds the Captain. When the «kind-hearted» Desdemona «evinced the greatest grief at the calamity,»<sup>12</sup> her grief at the Captain's misfortune fuels her husband's suspicions. The Moor imagines romantic entanglement between Desdemona and the Captain and misinterprets his wife's pity for the Captain's plight. Thus, the Moor discredits Desdemona's charitable appeal: «Do you know that my wife is in such grief at the Captain's accident that she is well nigh gone mad»<sup>13</sup> Before the Ensign assaults the Captain, he manipulates on the Moor by seconding his misreading of his wife who speaks truth to power. Regrettably, Desdemona's pity for the Captain paves the way for her untimely demise.

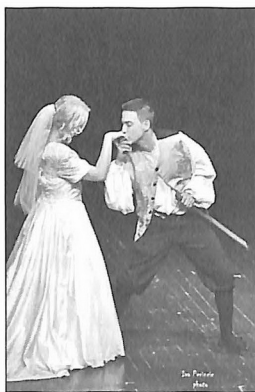


Figure 1: *Othello* (2014) directed by Artemis Preeshl.  
Photo Credit: Iva Perincic

Iago plays both sides against the middle. He urges the disgraced Cassio to solicit Desdemona, «the general's general,» to plead with her husband on his behalf: «[C]onfess yourself freely to her; importune her; she'll help to put you in your place again» (2.3.237-9) Iago dupes Cassio and Desdemona into helping him raise his status. By making Desdemona

11 Ivi, 118-19.

12 Ivi. 279-81,

13 Ivi, 282-3



complicit, Iago scaffolds his treachery in two steps: 1) «My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress; / I'll set her on»; and 2) «Myself the while to draw the Moor apart, / And bring him jump when he may Cassio find / Soliciting his wife» (2.3.86-91). Then, Emilia unwittingly plays the pander by arranging for Desdemona to meet Cassio, vouching, «I warrant it grieves my husband / As if the case were his » (3.3.5-6)<sup>14</sup>. Desdemona fulfills Cassio's request and boldly entreats her husband to reconcile with Cassio seven times. At the height of her appeal, she errs. She admits that when Othello wooed her, she «spoke...dispraisingly so many a time...Michael Cassio hath ta'en [Othello's] part»; ensnared in Iago's intrigue, Othello succumbs: «Prithee, no more; let him come when he will; I will deny thee nothing» (3.3.81-4, 86-7)<sup>15</sup>. Iago gaslights Desdemona to stoke Othello's jealousy so that he hires Iago to kill Cassio and promotes him to Cassio's former post: «Now art thou my lieutenant» (3.3.538)<sup>16</sup>. Unaware of the Moor's contract on Cassio's life, Desdemona ignores Emilia's advice.

Desdemona reneges on her promise to Othello and takes two more steps to win her suit. She enlists the Clown to send Cassio to Othello and begs for Othello to speak with and/or reinstate Cassio three more times. Having promised to convince Othello to restore Cassio to his lieutenancy, Desdemona's seeming duplicity lends credence to Iago's insinuation. When Lodovico arrives in Cyprus, Desdemona goes over Othello's head and confides in her relative. As Othello reads the packet from the Signoria, Iago telegraphs Cassio's status to Lodovico: «Lives, sir» (4.1.198)<sup>17</sup>. Ignorant of the letter's contents, this daughter of a Venetian Senator undermines Othello's authority in front of the Venetian diplomat: «Cousin, there's fall'n between him and my lord, / An unkind breach; but you shall make all well» (4.1.199-200)<sup>18</sup>. Othello swears as Lodovico intimates to Desdemona, the Signioria «command him home / Deputing Cassio in his government» (4.1.213-14)<sup>19</sup>. Owing to her isolation in Cyprus or frustration with her lack of influence over her husband, Desdemona speaks out of turn by sharing details of the private dispute be-

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14 SHAKESPEARE.

15 *Ivi.*

16 *Ivi.*

17 *Ivi.*

18 *Ivi.*

19 *Ivi.*

tween Othello and Cassio. Even as the Signioria give Othello's place to Cassio, when Othello slaps his wife, Lodovico is appalled. This act of domestic violence in public confirms Othello's unfitness as general. Desdemona's insubordination and outspokenness seal her demise.



FIGURE 2: Juraj Aras as Othello and Irena Bausovic as Desdemona in the Kazalištu lutaka Zadar production of *Othello* (2014) directed by Artemis Preeshl. Photo Credit: Iva Perincic

## The Handkerchief

The handkerchief in these stories exemplifies the diverse treatment of these two wives. In each story, the Moor gave his heirloom handkerchief to Disdemona/Desdemona. Whereas the Ensign took Disdemona's handkerchief from her, Emilia fulfills Iago's request by delivering Desdemona's handkerchief to him. However, Cinthio's and Shakespeare's stories differ in their treatment of actions that the Ensign's wife and Emilia take or do not take and what they say or do not say. The Ensign's wife takes no direct action to cause Disdemona's death, but when she knows what the Ensign is doing, she lets him fulfill Othello's command to kill Disdemona. Inversely, Emilia cooperates with Iago by stealing Desdemona's handkerchief, by which he indicts Desdemona in Othello's eyes. However, Emilia repents, yelling and knocking to valiantly save her mistress. The Ensign's wife permits murder, but Emilia upstands to try to stop Othello.

In Cinthio's cautionary tale, Disdemona «loved» the Ensign's wife and «spent the greater part of every day with her.»<sup>20</sup> This habitual visitation gives an opportunity to the Ensign to steal Disdemona's handker-

20 CINTHIO, pp. 57-8.

chief, «laying the snare for her final ruin; the Ensign hands his three-year-old daughter, beloved of Disdemona, to her and «cunningly...drew the kerchief from [Disdemona's] sash...so that she did not notice.”<sup>21</sup> The Ensign places the napkin on the Captain's bed. As Disdemona searches in vain for her missing handkerchief, the Captain inexplicably finds the napkin and tries to return Disdemona's handkerchief to the Moor. Hearing his commander's voice, the Captain flees. The Moor questions Disdemona about the knocks, but she knows nothing about the knocking. Subsequently, the Captain asks his wife to embroider a copy of the napkin. By pointing out the Captain's wife embroidering a copy of Disdemona's handkerchief in the window, the Ensign convinces the Moor of Disdemona's disloyalty. When the Moor asks Disdemona for her napkin, she “grew red as fire...to hide the scarlet of her cheeks...she pretended to seek the handkerchief.”<sup>22</sup> While Disdemona cannot explain the whereabouts of her handkerchief, the Ensign's wife is oblivious to her husband's theft of the napkin. Thus, Disdemona and the Ensign's wife were unaware that the Ensign had stolen and planted Disdemona's napkin in the Captain's chamber. Their ignorance did not result in bliss.

In Shakespeare's adaptation, Desdemona tends to Othello's headache by binding his head with her handkerchief. When Othello rejects her napkin as «too little,» Desdemona drops and reaches for the napkin (3.3.s.d.; 349-50)<sup>23</sup>. Ironically, Othello tells her, «Let it alone»; when Emilia spies the handkerchief, she uses the opportunity to please Iago, brings the napkin to him, and bargains to curry favor by offering «That which so often [he] did bid [her] steal» (3.3.350-1)<sup>24</sup>. Iago asks for the handkerchief. When Emilia seeks to know why he wanted her to «filch it», Iago «snatches» Desdemona's handkerchief from her; Emilia laments that the lost napkin will drive Desdemona «mad» (3.3.356-7,360)<sup>25</sup>. Yet, Iago refuses to say what he will do with the handkerchief and dismisses her. By leaving without Desdemona's handkerchief, Emilia tacitly consents to Iago's malintent.

Hence, Iago sows another seed of discontent in Othello. Iago executes his plan: «I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin / And let him

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21 Ivi, pp. 167, 172-3.

22 Ivi, pp. 215-17.

23 SHAKESPEARE.

24 Ivi.

25 Ivi.

find it» (3.3.365-7)<sup>26</sup>. Iago lies to Othello, stating that he saw «Cassio wipe his beard with» Desdemona's handkerchief «spotted with strawberries» (3.3.489; 492)<sup>27</sup>. As Emilia had predicted, the loss of her handkerchief distresses Desdemona. However, when Desdemona asks directly, «Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?», she mispeaks, «I know not, Madam» (3.4.15-16)<sup>28</sup>. Instead of confessing her theft, Emilia asks her mistress, «Is he not jealous?» (3.4.84, 87)<sup>29</sup>. In Act 3, Scene 4, Othello asks if Desdemona lost her handkerchief twice<sup>30</sup> and demands to see Desdemona's handkerchief no less than seven times (3.4.50, 57, 90; 94, 96, 98, 102)<sup>31</sup>. During this inquisition, Desdemona exacerbates Othello's rage by pursuing her suit for Cassio's reinstatement. Even after Emilia witnesses Othello's obsession with the handkerchief, Emilia refused to admit her theft. Instead, she redirects Desdemona's attention to Othello, asking, «Is not this man jealous?» (3.4.107)<sup>32</sup>. Cassio adds fuel to the fire of Othello's jealousy by asking Bianca to remove the strawberries from Desdemona's handkerchief that he had «found...in [his] chamber» and copy the embroidery (3.4.22)<sup>33</sup>. Iago further needles Othello with incessant questions about Desdemona's handkerchief, which seems to induce Othello's trance,» (4.1.15-43)<sup>34</sup>. Upon awakening, Othello observes Bianca returning Desdemona's handkerchief to Cassio (4.1.150-2)<sup>35</sup>. As Desdemona divulges details of Othello and Cassio's falling out, and Lodovico shares news of their impending return to Venice, Othello calls Desdemona «mad» and strikes her (4.1.215-220)<sup>36</sup>. Thus, Emilia's unwitting fulfillment of her husband's bidding and silence about Iago's malignity rends Desdemona and Othello's marriage.

Emilia's cooperation with Iago contrasts with the inaction of the Ensign's wife. Emilia fails to comply with her mistress' order to tell her what she knows about the handkerchief. Instead, Emilia's tacit consent

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26 Ivi.

27 Ivi..

28 Ivi.

29 Ivi.

30 Ivi.

31 Ivi.

32 Ivi.

33 Ivi.

34 Ivi.

35 Ivi.

36 Ivi.

enables Iago to carry out his disinformation campaign against Desdemona. Status offers insight into this discrepancy. The Ensign's wife is Desdemona's friend, not her maid; as wife of Othello's Ancient, Emilia serves Desdemona. Emilia's position seems to be contingent upon Iago's service to Othello. Thus, Emilia's status motivates her to survive by using her position to steal the handkerchief from Desdemona's quarters in war-torn Cyprus.

## Death

Yet, inaction fails to absolve the Ensign's wife. Distressed the Moor's anger, Disdemona asks the Ensign's wife to tell her what the Moor told the Ensign, but her friend fails her:

The Ensign's wife, who knew the whole truth (her husband wishing to make use of her to compass the death of Disdemona), but could never consent to such a project, dared not, from fear of her husband, disclose a single circumstance<sup>37</sup>.

Instead, the Ensign's wife warns Disdemona to act above suspicion. Disdemona counters that her attempts to reassure the Moor of her «fidelity and love» have failed<sup>38</sup>. In fact, the Moor's jealousy is so inflamed that when the Ensign calls the Captain Disdemona's «soul," the Moor vows: «I'll draw the soul from out her body; call me no man if that I fail to shut the world upon this wretch."<sup>39</sup> With the Moor's blessing, the Ensign leaps out of a closet to beat and kill Disdemona with a sack of sand in their bedchamber. The Ensign falsely accuses the Moor of cutting off the Captain's leg, but the Moor never confesses to his role in the killing his wife, even under torture. Upon the Moor's release, Disdemona's kin kill him. After he returns to his own country, the Ensign commits a like crime for which he is tortured. The Ensign dies from his injuries: «Heaven avenge[d] the innocence of Disdemona; in a *coup de grace*, Cinthio reveals, «all these events were narrated by the Ensign's Wife, who was privy to the whole, after his death."<sup>40</sup> Though the Ensign executes Disdemona, his Wife abets him through her willful denial and inaction. But who wouldn't fear such a husband? Deprived of consent,

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37 CINTHIO, 241-4.

38 Ivi, 246-7.

39 Ivi, 284-287.

40 Ivi, 371-372.



In *Othello*, the general hits Desdemona in front of Lodovico, Othello accuses Desdemona of being «strumpet,” and «whore, » (4.2.91-100)<sup>41</sup>. both of which Desdemona denies. Emilia cannot consent to Othello’s lies about Desdemona. Instead of bystanding, when Iago feigns ignorance about Othello’s accusations, Emilia insinuates that her husband was a «cogging cozening slave, to get some office» (4.3.157)<sup>42</sup>. So loudly does Emilia protest that Iago warns her to use her inside voice: «Speak within door» and dismisses her as a «fool» (4.2.170, 175)<sup>43</sup>. With Emilia silenced, Desdemona beseeches Iago to help her. Ironically, Iago reassures her, «all things shall be well» (4.2.199).<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Desdemona meekly obeys Othello, goes to bed, and complies with his request to dismiss Emilia. As Desdemona asks Emilia about women who commit adultery, Emilia intimates her probable fear of Iago’s abuse: «[S]ay they strike us» (4.1.76)<sup>45</sup>. Desdemona parts from Emilia with a prayer for good to mend bad (4.3.91)<sup>46</sup>. Despite their mutual sense of foreboding, Desdemona and Emilia hope for the best. Alas, Desdemona’s wish is unfulfilled. Othello asks if Desdemona has prayed because, although he intends to kill her, he «would not kill [her] soul» (5.2.35-6)<sup>47</sup>. Othello denounces Desdemona for her presumed infidelity with Cassio, which she vehemently denies. When Othello tells Desdemona to go to bed, she seemingly consents to intimacy with her husband. When Othello tries to kill her, she tells him not to. Nonetheless, Othello «smothers» her (5.2.103 s.d.)<sup>48</sup> Emilia’s insistent pounding on the door interrupts Othello’s murder of his wife. Yet, when Desdemona revives, she proclaims her innocence to Emilia and absolves Othello. Only after Desdemona expires does Emilia reveal Iago’s betrayal to Othello. Although Othello attempts to murder Iago, Iago inflicts his wife with a mortal wound. By implicating her husband, her admission costs her life.

The deaths of Disdemona/Desdemona, The Moor/Othello, Emilia, and the Ensign uncover the importance of stopping bullies in their tracks. Disdemona/Desdemona trust men in power and fail to heed warnings

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41 SHAKESPEARE.

42 Ivi.

43 Ivi.

44 Ivi.

45 Ivi.

46 Ivi.

47 Ivi.

48 Ivi.

The deaths of Disdemona/Desdemona, The Moor/Othello, Emilia, and the Ensign uncover the importance of stopping bullies in their tracks. Disdemona/Desdemona trust men in power and fail to heed warnings that could have prevented their deaths. However, the status imbalance in their marriages deprive these female characters of the power and agency to their friends, employers, or employees. Thus, their dependency on their respective husbands inhibits their abilities to speak up for good reason. After Disdemona/Desdemona lobby to help the Captain/Lieutenant Cassio regain his position, their husbands kill them. After Emilia divulges Iago's perfidious plot, he murders her. When the Moor refuses to confess, Disdemona's relatives kill him. Othello realizes his culpability and holds himself accountable by committing suicide. Justice was meted out as recidivistic Ensign tries to run his game in his own country. The Ensign is tortured and dies of his injuries. Though Iago refuses to incriminate himself, his fate after his arrest remains unknown. Yet, the Ensign's wife who knew what her husband was doing and allowed events to unfold lived to tell. The moral of these stories, silence is safer.

Cinthio and Shakespeare teach the readers about marriage and consent through *The Moor of Venice* and *Othello*. Women of wealth and power have a greater ability to consent. Women who lacked means had fewer opportunities to decide their fates. Having married outside of Venice's gold and silver books, Disdemona reflects upon her elopement and advises the Ensign's wife: «much I fear that I shall prove a warning to young girls not to marry against the wishes of their parents, and that the Italian ladies may learn from me not to wed a man whom nature and habitude of life estrange from us.»<sup>49</sup> However, xenophobia does not complete the picture.

Fear of retribution renders consent amorphous at best, and deadly at worst. If a wife anticipates punishment for speaking up, she is not free to choose. Emilia steals Desdemona's handkerchief to please her husband, which ends the lives of her lord, mistress, and herself. Did Emilia's fear of battering cause her to lie to Desdemona about the napkin? Emilia intimates that Iago may have beaten her. After Othello hit her, Desdemona prepares to be intimate with him in bed. Similarly, the Ensign's wife never tells Disdemona of the danger posed by the Ensign and the Moor. In the Early Modern era, and today, only if safety is ensured can consent be authentic.

ARTEMIS PREESHL

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49 CINTHIO, 234-7.

## Ամփոփում

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*#ԵսԱլ Շարժումը փոխած է մեր մտապատկերը կիներու հաւանութեան շուրջ տղամարդոց հետ կապ հաստատելու առնչութեամբ: Այս նոր մօտեցումը կը գունաւորէ գրական երկերու մշակութային պատշաճեցումներու մեր ընկալումը:*

*Արտեմիս Փրիշլը բաղդատական ուսումնասիրութիւն մը կը ներկայացնէ Ջիրալտի Չինտիոյի Վեմետիկի Մաւրը (1565) եւ Շէյքսպիրի Օթելլոյի (1603) ստեղծագործութիւններուն մասին, յատկապէս ուշադրութիւն դարձնելով հաւանութեան դերին Չինտիոյի Տեղդեմոնայ ու Շէյքսպիրի Տեղտեմոնայ տիպարներուն, զանոնք համեմատելով Դրօշակիրին կնոջ՝ Մաւրին մէջ եւ Օթելլոյի էմիլիա կերպարին:*

*Այս աշխատութեան հեղինակը կ'ուզէ հասկնալ, թէ ի՞նչպէս ոյժի պարտադրութիւնը կը պայմանաւորէ կնոջական հաւանութեան գաղափարը այս երկու պատմութիւններուն պղատոնական բարեկամութեան եւ ամուսնութեան մէջ: Վենետիկի Մաւրին մէջ, Դրօշակիրը լարուած է հեշտասէր ցանկութեամբ Տեղտեմոնայի հանդէպ: Շէյքսպիրի թատերախաղին մէջ, սակայն, Եակոն Օթելլոյին նախանձը կը դրդէ ոչ թէ սէրային իղձերէ տարուած, այլ դիւրօք կոբոնցներու զայրոյթին պատճառաւ:*