



Title	Language and Music in Patriarchal Thought : A Study of Othello
Author(s)	Miura, Yoshika
Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 1997, 36, p. 1-16
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/25375
rights	
Note	

The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

Language and Music in Patriarchal Thought: A Study of *Othello*

Yoshika Miura

The Elizabethan era was the golden age of English music. Elizabeth I loved music and supported musicians. This era produced such great composers as Thomas Morley, William Bird, and John Dawland. Peers loved madrigals, and many ballads were sung in London. It is impossible to exaggerate that music was one of the main pillars which supported the Elizabethan mind. *Othello* has various musical scenes. This music is not a bit player as back ground music. It works as the foreground which forms the thought in the play. I would like to examine the important role of music in *Othello* in this thesis.

Before I examine the role of music in the play, I would like to consider the attitudes toward music in the Elizabethan era. As Takuzo Yamaura points out in *Introduction to Shakespeare's Use of Music*, the attitudes toward music in the Elizabethan era adopted the Platonic tradition and the thoughts which come from Pythagoras (14). One of the important points in the attitudes was about harmony. It was thought that the spheres whose motions and relationships are regular play music. Human beings try to imitate the harmonious music of the spheres. To imitate the music of the spheres is not only to imitate it in practical music but also to be harmonious in the relationships among persons or in a person's mind. Thus music was considered as a symbol of harmony at various levels.

However, this theory that music symbolizes harmony didn't contain all kinds of practical music. Drinking songs and many ballads which common people loved were not included in harmonious music. Church music, by contrast, was considered as good music. According to John Stevens in *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, it was thought that "good music" such as church music produces "good moral results and devotional stirrings" (64).

So music that symbolizes harmony seems to refer to speculative music and church music in practical music. However, even about church music, it was questioned whether it was good for humans. Anthony Storr in *Music and the Mind* examples St. Augustine. Though St. Augustine admitted tracts, he feared that he might lose himself because of a pleasant feeling caused by tones. He decided not to listen to singing voice if he found himself moved by singing voice rather than truth in songs (43). That is to say, whatever kind of practical music was played, to play music itself was questioned. According to Morrison Comegys Boyd's *Elizabethan Music and Musical Criticism*, some people in the Elizabethan era, too, reproached playing music because "much music marreth man's manners" (16).

In this way, there were two contradictory attitudes toward music in the Elizabethan era. On the one hand, it was thought that music symbolizes harmony. It was mostly applied to speculative music. So we can see it in metaphors with musical terms in literary works. On the other hand, to play music actually was often reproached.

Language and Music

Why was to play music actually reproached? St.

Augustine feared that he might lose himself because of joy of sense when he listened to tracts. That is to say, it was feared that music might appeal not to mind but to body. This close relationship between music and body was considered bad for humans in the Elizabethan era. As Leslie C. Dunn in "Ophelia's Songs in *Hamlet*: Music, Madness, and the Feminine" points out, it was thought that music "could not only distract the mind from higher thoughts, but even unbalance it by arousing excessive and unruly passions" (56). These "unruly passions" refer to especially sexuality.

Why was it thought that music should arouse sexuality? Dunn considers this reason based on Roland Barthes. Language has meanings. But "voice-in-music" releases "linguistic 'body'" from "semantic constraint." It liberates "a suppressed voluptuousness in both language and listener." "The listener, through his/her identification with music, enters into a relationship with the performer's body" (53).

According to Dunn, to make music opposed to language is "the Western tendency" (54). This opposition can be seen in Julia Kristeva's thought where language is related with father and music with mother. Kristeva says "music" metaphorically. However, Ellen Dissanayake, who studies the origin of music, says that music originates from the exchange between a baby and a mother in the first year (22). In this way, music is opposed to language, and music is related with mother, language is related with father.

[Music] becomes implicated in the binarisms that organize patriarchal thinking, and thereby associated with the unconscious and the irrational as well as with the feminine. (Dunn 54-55)

Music distracts masculine language order, and woman distracts

patriarchy with her excessive sexuality. Thus the opposition between language – masculine – order and music – feminine – to distract with sexuality was made up.

We can see the above structure in an essay in the Elizabethan era which attacked music in the above structure. Phillip Stubbes attacked music because he thought a man playing music becomes “womannish” (Dunn 56-57). This music in patriarchal thought can be seen in myths and literary works. A siren, who tempts sailors with her singing voice and makes them jump into waters to die, is a typical example in myths.

Iago and Language

Before I examine *Othello* in the opposition between language and music discussed above, I would like to examine Stephen Greenblatt’s study about *Othello* in “The Improvisation of Power.” Greenblatt notices that Iago acts impromptu according to circumstances. Iago makes up the plot against Othello impromptu. Iago displays his improvisation by “constant recourse to narrative” (41). He sets forth various narratives, makes up others’ stories, and makes his narratives penetrate into others.

Not only he serves narratives to others but also serves himself narratives about himself. As Greenblatt says, Iago serves various narratives about his motives. Many critics have tried to fix his motive from his various narratives, or Coleridge said “the motive hunting of a motiveless malignity.” Greenblatt denies to fix his motive. When he makes Roderigo join into his plot, Iago says, “I am not what I am” (1. 1. 65). This line has been interpreted as “I am not what I seem,” that is to say, “the true nature of me is different from that shown to the world.”

However, Greenblatt points out that this line means not only that. The line means that each of his narratives about himself refers to “something else, something just out of our grasp” (41). Both others and Iago himself are constantly remade in his narratives.

Then what does Iago want to keep by manipulating narratives? Here I would like to apply to Iago the opposition between language and music based on patriarchal thought discussed above. I think that Iago wants to keep his own paternal authority by manipulating narratives and therefore adhering to language. I think so because, while Iago adheres to language, he is conscious of music which is related with woman and sexuality. First, by using metaphors associated with music that disturbs the order, he makes fun of his wife Emilia, “you are pictures out o’doors; / Bells in your parlours” (2. 1. 109-10). Second, when he sees Othello and Desdemona happy to be able to meet again, he says: “O, you are well tun’d now” (2. 1. 199). This line seems to show that Iago values music that symbolizes harmony. But he says next: “But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music, as honest as I am” (2. 1. 200-01). Iago intends to produce discord. That is to say, Iago wants music which shows that others’ order is disturbed. Thus, Iago keeps his paternal authority by manipulating narratives and by giving others metaphors associated with music which disturbs the order and gives others effeminate nature. But in the process, he makes a decisive error. Just by his power to manipulate narratives, he makes up a story that Emilia has a sin of adultery with Othello:

I hate the Moor,
 And it is thought abroad, that ’twixt my sheets
 He’s done my office; I know not if ’t be true . . .
 Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,

Well do, as if for surety. . . . (1. 3. 384-88)

Therefore, just because of his power to make up such a narrative, he becomes obsessed with sexuality.

For that I do suspect the lustful Moor
 Hath leap'd into my seat, the thought whereof
 Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards. . . .
 (2. 1. 290-92)

That sexuality which is considered as women's monstrous aspect exists in Iago himself who considers women as others means that Iago's paternal authority collapses. So Iago tries to justify his paternal authority by shifting his sexuality to others. Because his aim is to justify his identity, it does not matter to whom he should shift his sexuality. Therefore his plot is pointed at various characters impromptu. About shifting his sexuality, in "Lieutenancy, Standing in, and *Othello*," Julia Genster expresses: "Othello has become Iago's lieutenant, doing his imaginative work" (230).

Sexuality from Iago to Cassio by Music

Then how does Iago shift his sexuality to others? When he shifts his sexuality, he makes use of practical music that is said to arouse unruly passions. When Iago invites Cassio who is a poor drinker to a revel, he himself sings drinking songs (2. 3. 83-90). It is not only drinks but also music that arouses Cassio's unruly passions. Thus, unruly passions has been shifted to Cassio by Iago and has quarrels with Roderigo and Montano to lose his position of lieutenant.

In act 3 scene 1 Cassio makes musicians play music in front of the castle to try to please Othello. The musicians play the wind instruments. That Cassio chooses music of wind

instruments means that unruly passions has been shifted to Cassio by Iago's music because, according to John Hollander in *The Untuning of the Sky*, wind instruments were considered as "the antitheses of reason and uncontrolled passion" (35). This music is stopped by the clown. That symbolizes that Cassio's sexuality will be punished.

From Seeing to Hearing

How does Iago shift his sexuality to Othello? Before I discuss it, I would like to consider seeing and hearing. As Joel Fineman says in "The Sound of O in *Othello*: The Real of the Tragedy of Desire," Othello values seeing very much. As an example, he quotes Othello's line "I'll see before I doubt" (3.3.190). That the men except Iago value seeing is, I think, proved in the opening scenes. Act 1 scene 1 starts in the darkness of the night. Brabantio, who believes in Iago's tale that Othello is tempting Desdemona, claims the light repeatedly to hunt them (1.1.140-44, 1.1.166). That the darkness of the night gets bright with the light makes audience conscious of seeing. This scene symbolizes that seeing is valued.

In act 1 scene 3, when Brabantio claims Othello's crime, Duke of Venice replies: "To vouch this is no proof, / Without more certain and more overt test" (1.3.107-08). Because "overt" means 'open to view,' we can see Duke claim seeing. Next, after Brabantio gives up Desdemona, he replies to Duke who tries to comfort him: "But words are words; I never yet did hear / That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear" (1.3.218-19). Brabantio denies hearing.

Moreover, that Othello becomes a person who is found twice emphasizes that he affirms seeing. In act 1 scene 2, when Iago, who sees someone coming, tells Othello to hide, Othello

replies: "Not, I must be found" (1.2.30). Again, Othello becomes a person who must be found because his ship hit by the storm has not arrived at the harbour yet in act 2 scene 1.

However, both language and music which Iago is conscious of need hearing (because Iago uses language for speaking more than language for writing). Therefore, in order to shift Iago's sexuality to Othello by giving him music, first of all, Iago must completely bring Othello to the world of hearing where the opposition between language and music exists. Here the opposition between Othello of seeing and Iago of hearing arises. Joel Fineman points out the opposition:

Othello, the play, is organized or thought through precisely such a large disrupting and disjunctive thematic opposition between visionary presence and verbal representation.
 . . . (110)

Then, I will examine the process of bringing Othello from seeing to hearing. The following lines show Iago's decision to bring Othello to the world of hearing: ". . . to abuse Othello's ear, / That he is too familiar with his wife" (1.3.393-94), "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear" (2.3.347). When Iago tries to inspire jealousy into Othello, at first Othello is not agitated and replies "I'll see before I doubt" (3.3.194). Iago replies:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;
 And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
 She lov'd them most. (3.3.210-12)

That is to say, Iago points out that Desdemona deceived seeing of her father, and he denies seeing. Though Othello is gradually trapped in Iago's plot, he still claims seeing: "give me the ocular proof" (3.3.366), "Make me to see't" (3.3.370). Iago replies "Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on, /

Behold her topp'd?" (3.3.401-02) and inclines Othello to abhor seeing. Then, as Fineman quotes, he denies seeing: "It is impossible you should see this" (3.3.408). Instead Iago makes Othello hear the story that Cassio was intimate with Desdemona in his dream. Moreover, he says, "did I to-day / See Cassio wipe his beard with [Desdemona's handkerchief]" (3.3.445-46). Though he says "see," as Fineman quotes, he says, "It [the handkerchief] speaks against her" (3.3.488). It means that Iago makes Othello consider handkerchief as a thing which he should perceive it with hearing (therefore, we may say that Othello perceives the handkerchief with hearing in act 4 scene 1). Here, Othello loses his power of seeing and gets brought into the world of hearing completely. He says, "let me hear thee say / That Cassio's not alive" (3.3.478-79). Because Othello has lost the power of seeing, he can no longer perceive Desdemona's attractiveness with seeing: "Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted" (5.1.35). After the loss of the power of seeing he comes to perceive Desdemona's attractiveness with the sense of smell, I think. Othello says to Desdemona, "O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair? / Thou smell'st so sweet" (4.2.69-70) And, just before he kills Desdemona, he says, ". . . I'll smell it on the tree, / A balmy breath . . ." (5.2.15-16).

Sexuality from Iago to Othello by Musical Language

In this way, Iago brings Othello into the world where the opposition between language and music exists. At the same time, he shifts his sexuality to Othello by music. He doesn't play music before Othello, but he makes language assume the nature of music intentionally. When one speaks to others, the meanings of language have priority. However, by repeating

the same sound in the line, the speech becomes rhythmical like the percussion beat time, and sounds have priority over meanings like language in music. So, the speech where the same sound is repeated can have the same effect as language in music, that is to say, can arouse sexuality in a listener and make him / her the other in patriarchy. I will call such language 'musical language.'

Iago makes use of this 'musical language' in order to shift his sexuality to Othello in act 3 scene 3. First, I would like to examine the first half of the temptation scene, from line 93 to line 334 in act 3 scene 3. Iago repeats Othello's words, and makes Othello repeat them again. The same words are repeated like a refrain in a song.

Iago. Indeed ?

Oth. Indeed ? Indeed. . . .

Is he not honest ?

Iago. Honest, my lord ?

Oth. Honest ? ay, honest.

.

Oth. What dost thou think ?

Iago. Think, my lord ?

Oth. Think, my lord ? (3.3.102-110)

Next, let us examine the following lines.

I do beseech you,

Though I perchance am vicious in my guess,

(As I confess it is my nature's plague

To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy. . . .

(3.3.148-51)

The /s / sound is repeated seven times in "beseech," "perchance," "vicious," "guess," "confess," "spy," "abuses," and "jealousy."

Good name in man and woman 's dear, my lord ;
Is the immediate jewel of our souls. . . . (3.3.159-60)

The /m / sound is repeated five times.

Who steals my purse, steals trash, 'tis something, nothing,
'T was mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands.
. . . . (3.3.161-62)

The /s / sound is repeated four times, and the /z / sound is repeated five times.

You'd take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble. . . .
(3.3.154)

The /nou /or /nɔ:r / sound is repeated three times.

In this way, in 242 lines from line 93 to line 334, Iago has 29 passages which have same sounds (I counted the following cases among them: when the same sound is repeated more than three times a line, when the same sound is repeated many times in two lines, and when one word alliterates with another).

Iago's 'musical language' shifts sexuality gradually to Othello, and Othello comes to have 'musical language.'

Iago. But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!
Oth. O misery! (3.3.173-75)

The /ou /or /ɔ:/ sound is repeated four times in Iago's lines. Othello is infected with the sound in "O" in his line.

In the latter half of the temptation scene, from line 335 to line 486, sexuality has been completely shifted to Othello, and Othello has been infected with 'musical language.' Othello repeats the same words like refrains in a song.

Ha, ha, false to me, to me? (3.3.339)

O monstrous, monstrous! (3. 3. 433)

O blood, Iago, blood! (3. 3. 458)

Then, the same sounds are repeated.

I slept the next night well, was free and merry. . . .
(3. 3. 346)

“Next” alliterates with “night,” “free” rhymes with “merry.”

Thou hadst been better have been born a dog. . . .
(3. 3. 368)

The /b/ sound is repeated four times.

Oh horror’s head horrors accumulate. (3. 3. 376)

The /h/ sound and /ou/or/o/ sound are repeated three times.

As soon as Othello suspects that Iago is lying, Iago repeats the /ou/ sound which shows passion that arouses Othello’s sexuality :

O monstrous world, take note, take note, O world. . . .
(3. 3. 383)

In this way, Othello comes to have ‘musical language.’ In the first half of the temptation scene from line 93 to line 334 (242 lines), Othello has 96 lines, and he has 12 passages which have the same sounds. On the other hand, In the latter half of the temptation scene from line 335 to line 486 (152 lines), Othello has 83 lines, and he has 32 passages which have the same sounds. Othello has more passages than in the first half by 20 passages. The fact shows that ‘musical language’ is shifted to Othello by Iago’s temptation. When we compare this number with those of other scenes, we can see that the

quantity is more than those in other scenes. For example, in act 1 scene 3 where Othello speaks before Duke about the purity of his love to Desdemona, Othello has 90 lines but has only 15 passages which have the same sounds. In act 1 scene 3 where the tide of war is reported, men have 75 lines but have only 11 passages which have the same sounds.

In the first half of the play Othello doesn't speak about music. But after Othello has been infected with 'musical language,' Othello becomes conscious of music.

Hang her, I do but say what she is: so delicate with her needle, an admirable musician, O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear; of so high and plenteous wit and invention! (4. 1. 183-86)

This expression about music is associated with Orpheus' music which symbolizes harmony. Othello's 'musical language' is the contrary of it. We can see that Othello is conscious of his 'musical language' which is far from harmony.

In this way, Iago succeeds in shifting sexuality. However, at the last of the play, all Iago's plot is revealed, so sexuality that he shifted to others returns to Iago. Therefore, his language loses patriarchal authority, after this Iago never manipulates narratives.

From this time forth I never will speak word. (5. 2. 305)

By knowing the truth, Othello gets back the power of seeing.

When we shall meet at count,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. . . . (5. 2. 274-76)

Desdemona's Secret Attempt by Music

Iago makes use of music in order to arouse sexuality in listeners and to make the listeners the others in patriarchy. Desdemona makes use of the same kind of music's nature too, but she does it for the purpose which is different from Iago's.

Desdemona is tormented by Othello because of the sin of adultery which she doesn't commit. When she and Emilia are in the room alone before Othello comes back to the bedroom, Desdemona sings a song. In this song, a woman laments because her lover betrays her. What does Desdemona want to show by singing this song? I would like to discuss what she wants to show not by the meaning of the song but by singing itself. Desdemona suffers from the false accusation that she commits the sin of adultery and therefore that she deviates from patriarchy. So, she knows the following thing well: if woman makes sexuality overflow in order to flee from patriarchy, the deviation is only within patriarchy, so the woman will be punished after all. So instead of it, she proposes the following thing.

First, she shows woman's sexuality by singing which is associated with monstrous sexuality that is considered as an aspect of woman.

Second, she says before she sings:

My mother had a maid call'd Barbary,
.
. . . she had a song of "willow,"
.
And she died singing it...
. . . I . . .
. . . sing it like poor Barbary. . . . (4.3.26-33)

Julia Genster in "Lieutenancy, Standing in, and *Othello*" points

out about her words that “she assimilates Othello’s Moorish identity” when “she takes Barbary’s part” (because Barbary is the name of the region in the North Africa) (233). I think that by assimilating Othello’s identity Desdemona assimilates man represented by Othello who torments her. She sings taking the part of man. By doing so, she makes man assume the nature of music that arouses sexuality. Therefore she shows that not only woman but man has sexuality.

Third, she interrupts the song again and again by inserting some brief words. As Ernest Brennecke in “‘Nay, that’s not next!’, The Significance of Desdemona’s ‘Willow Song’” points out, she makes an error in the order of the song and interrupts the song by the words “Nay, that’s not next” (4. 3. 52). This mistake emphasizes the interruption of the song. I think that the many interruptions has a meaning. By again and again stopping singing which shows that both man and woman have sexuality, she cuts off the sexuality from both man and woman. By doing so, she shows that she tries to seek new relationships between man and woman where they are not tied down to sexuality and man doesn’t rule woman and woman doesn’t rule man. Dying Desdemona says to Emilia who enters into the room :

Emil. O, who has done this deed ?

Des. Nobody, I myself, farewell. . . . (5. 2. 124-25)

Desdemona not only protects Othello. Because not others but she herself cuts off the sexuality from man and woman in singing, she can take a positive attitude to seek the new relationships. By saying not others but “I myself,” she tries to tell Emilia her positive attitude indirectly. Emilia dies singing the refrain “willow, willow, willow” that Desdemona left without singing as if she carries out Desdemona’s will.

I would like to finish this thesis by concluding that the opposition between language and music in patriarchal thought involves all the characters in *Othello*.

Works Cited

- Boyd, Morrison Comegys. *Elizabethan Music and Musical Criticism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940.
- Brennecke, Ernest. "'Nay, That's Not Next!' The Significance of Desdemona's 'Willow Song'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* January (1953): 35-38.
- Dunn, Leslie C. "Ophelia's Songs in *Hamlet*: Music, Madness, and the Feminine." *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*. Ed. Leslie C. Dunn, Nancy A. Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 50-64.
- Fineman, Joel. "The Sound of O in *Othello*: The Real of the Tragedy of Desire." *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello*. Ed. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1994. 104-121.
- Genster, Julia. "Lieutenancy, Standing in, and *Othello*." *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello*. Ed. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1994. 216-237.
- Hollander, John. *The Untuning of the Sky*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company • Inc., 1970.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Improvisation of Power." *William Shakespeare's Othello*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987. 37-60.
- Stevens, John. *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1961.
- Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Ed. M. R. Ridley, The Arden Shakespeare. London: Routledge, 1958.
- Storr, Anthony. *Music and the Mind* (『音楽する精神』). Trans. Yuki Sato, Tadao Osawa, Takafumi Kurokawa. Tokyo: Hakuyosha, 1994.
- Yamaura, Takuzo. *Introduction to Shakespeare's Use of Music* (『シェークスピア音楽論序説』). Tokyo: Taibundo, 1970.