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“Strumpet,” “Huswife,” “Whore”: Centering *Othello*’s Bianca

A Thesis by

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Chapman University

Orange, CA

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

May 2022

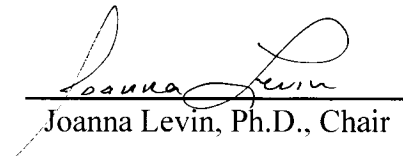
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May 2022

“Strumpet,” “Huswife,” “Whore”: Centering *Othello*’s Bianca

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by Phoebe Merten

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## ABSTRACT

“Strumpet,” “Huswife,” “Whore”: Centering *Othello*’s Bianca

by Phoebe Merten

Is Bianca a sex worker? What meanings change if she is or isn’t? Not enough artistic or critical attention has been paid the character. It seems likely that the initial lack of attention stemmed from Bianca’s status as a purported sex worker, as though this makes her somehow categorically different from the other women in the play, or inherently less interesting. There has in the past decade or so been a marked increase in scholarship on sex work, but this too largely skims over Bianca, likely because of the ambiguity surrounding her profession. In my introduction I go over some theory and context. Section one, “Who Says? Editorial Intervention,” is a discussion of editorial bias concerning Bianca’s character listing and interpretation of dialogue. I move on in “What Does That Word Mean Anyway?” to an examination of slippage in terminology surrounding sex work and misogyny in early modern England and today, in an effort to demonstrate some lost nuance in our readings of the play. In “Historicizing Bianca,” I speculate on authorial intent and compare *Othello* to its contemporaries, demonstrating the differences between Bianca’s depiction and that more typical of sex workers in the period. “Unhistorical Bianca” explicates a misogynistic ritual of male homosocial bonding in *Othello* through a lens informed by postmodern examples of the phenomenon. “Performing Bianca” delves into recent adaptations of the play and discusses issues of race. I conclude with a few ideas about areas of further research.

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# 1 Introduction

Most criticism written about Bianca begins with a statement on how little there is of it, which becomes less true with each iteration. I still maintain that not enough has been done to remedy the lack of artistic and critical attention paid the character. For one thing, the majority of character listings still describe Bianca as “a courtesan,”<sup>1</sup> despite the continually accruing doubt as to her profession, although it has become popular since the 1980s (Rulon-Miller 103) to additionally specify she is “Cassio’s mistress.”<sup>2</sup> Even recent, ostensibly feminist scholarship sometimes fails to examine this matter; for example: “As a courtesan, [Bianca] of course represents the opposite of Desdemona’s marital fidelity” (Kemp 90). This would seem to rest not only on the problematic assumption that there is no doubt Bianca is a courtesan, but further supposes that Bianca and Desdemona neatly map onto a binary of the good vs. bad woman, which is not actually clear at all from the text. Additionally, while those of us pursuing graduate English degrees would hope students encounter *Othello* primarily through academically-inclined texts, many are going to encounter instead—or more optimistically, first—a summary of *Othello* through a site like CliffsNotes or a video like Thug Notes, notable here because the former omits Bianca entirely (“Play Summary”), and the latter reduces her to a mudflap-esque silhouette, the only character not given a face, and refers to her as “some woman [Cassio] playin’” (Bauer 00:01:37-00:01:44).<sup>3</sup> It seems likely to me that the initial lack of attention (from inception to the 1980s; see Rulon-Miller)

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<sup>1</sup> This description first appears in Folio character listing, after Shakespeare’s death (Pechter 136).

<sup>2</sup> See appendix A for a sampling of character listings I have taken to be representative; these are all the editions of *Othello* that were available in the Chapman library plus a few that weren’t.

<sup>3</sup> This isn’t necessarily a bad thing; in fact, referring to Bianca as being “played” by Cassio is a fairly standard (if, in my view, incorrect) reading of the situation, stated in nonstandard parlance. Kyle Grady discusses the pedagogical importance of “enabl[ing] various points of access” (“Why Front” 537) via nonstandard English in the classroom; Thug Notes uses a similar mode to make Shakespeare more accessible to students.



stemmed from Bianca's status as a purported sex worker, as though this makes her somehow categorically different from the other women in the play, or inherently less interesting. There has in the past decade or so been a marked increase in scholarship on sex work, but this too largely skims over Bianca, likely because of the ambiguity I will explore. Bianca is too whorish for the past and not whorish enough for the present, perhaps. Certainly part of the problem stems from conceptual slippage surrounding sex work and various misogynistic slurs, as discussed by Kay Stanton in her 2014 book, *Shakespeare's 'Whores': Erotics, Politics, and Poetics*. It is sometimes unclear in the present day how literally designations of "whore" are meant, much less in centuries-old texts. So why take it literally? Why not?

It takes perhaps more research than it should to even encounter the idea that Bianca may not be a sex worker, unless you happen to be a student in a class using the Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of *Othello* edited by Jane Coles, which in 1992 was notably the first place such a supposition appeared (Rulon-Miller 106-7).<sup>4</sup> I began the present study by searching for something new to say about a play entering its fifth century whilst taking a class on race in early modern drama in 2018. The inciting question came from my marginalia: "what if true," I wrote next to Bianca's "I am no strumpet, but of a life as honest / As you that thus abuse me" (*O* 5.1.124-125).<sup>5</sup> I found Bianca's protestation to "strumpet" odd, given the implicit pressure I sensed to collapse her character into the silhouette she's presented as in the Thug Notes video. Emilia has called Bianca a strumpet in response to Iago's supposition that Bianca is in some way responsible for Cassio's being set upon in the dark by Roderigo and some mystery assailant (Iago himself), a

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<sup>4</sup> I learned of this edition through Rulon-Miller's article, and have since purchased both the 1992 edition and the 2014 edition, which is updated with production photos and more dynamic typesetting. It's an excellent resource for high school or introductory undergraduate courses.

<sup>5</sup> Except where otherwise noted, all in-text quotations of *Othello* use the 2007 Bedford/St. Martin's edition edited by Kim F. Hall.

supposition to which Bianca does not verbally respond. She is being accused of perhaps conspiracy to murder here, beyond being accused of whoredom, yet she seems to feel more strongly about defending herself against the purportedly true claim of whoredom than the definitely false claim of murder. Iago's conflation of the two, too, is interesting. "This is the fruits of whoring" (*O* 5.1.118) he says, as though it is a foregone conclusion that unchaste behavior results in murder, foreshadowing the end of the play, or, as Pechter puts it, "reiterat[ing] the false accusation at the play's center" (*Interpretive Traditions* 132). The particulars of Iago's accusation are not completely clear; with first "I do suspect this trash [Bianca] / To be a party in this injury" (*O* 5.1.86-87), then "Cassio hath here been set on in the dark / By Roderigo and fellows that are scaped" (*O* 5.1.114-115), he perhaps suggests that Bianca told the fictional band of rogues where to find Cassio. It was his own knowledge of Cassio's dinner plans with Bianca that allowed him to engineer the attack, so this accusation provides an interesting point of comparison between Bianca and Iago. It is an instance of that too-familiar tactic whereby an accuser projects their own actions onto the accused.

In a play so centrally concerned with the nature of truth, rumor, reputation, and sex, why have so few questioned Bianca's purported profession?<sup>6</sup> There is less textual evidence for Bianca as sex worker than one might assume. She is treated by the other characters in much the same way as the other women of the play. The rumors to which Bianca is subject are similar to those regarding Desdemona, yet only the latter are interpreted as slander. Bianca's treatment is notably dissimilar to that of contemporaneous sex workers depicted in other plays. Most importantly, how we have traditionally interpreted the "truth" within the play is subject to a great deal of implicit biases, as explicated by the tectonic shift over the past several decades from mid-twentieth century

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<sup>6</sup> Pechter eloquently makes this point (*Interpretive Traditions* 132-135)

arguments that Othello, being such a well-developed, human character, could not possibly be Black to recent examinations of race and racism in Shakespeare's time and ours.<sup>7</sup> The status of sex workers within varying feminist frameworks necessarily informs scholars' reading of Bianca, whether she is "really" a sex worker or not. How do we define "sex work"? What is the difference, in the early modern era and now, between sex workers and other women, who may, for example, marry for financial stability? Is Bianca a sex worker? Are the other women in the play?<sup>8</sup>

This brings me to some qualms I have about the nature of this project which remain unresolved and which therefore I feel I ought to explain. I agree with Sanchez when she says "all seemingly objective narratives are produced from situations of desire and interest" (2), and the way forward to me is to provide transparency on a meta-level regarding my thought process. It is not my intention to imply that Bianca would be a better person or a more interesting character for lack of being a sex worker nor to say that she is only worthy of further study because she may not be a sex worker after all. My goal is to highlight the biases which may have marked other readings of the text and to more closely examine the way language is used to demarcate and demean the women of the play. However, I find my work here unavoidably reminiscent of editor M.R. Ridley's 1958 examination of Othello's Blackness (Ridley l-iv), in which he reaffirms racist attitudes through nuance rather than flattening, as pointed out by Karen Newman in her 1987 discussion of miscegenation. Ridley spends a great deal of time "debunking, [yet] canoniz[ing] the prejudices" (Newman 144) of prior critics, arguing "that a man is black in colour is no reason why he should, even to European eyes, look sub-human" (Ridley li). As Newman puts it, "he hastens to add the

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<sup>7</sup> See especially Smith and Corredera.

<sup>8</sup> I am perhaps echoing Julian C. Rice's "appalling remark" (Rulon-Miller 102) about "the potential whore which exists within all women" (qtd. in Rulon-Miller 102), but I hope it's clear that my point is not that all women might be whores, whatever that is, but rather that all women may be perceived or labeled as whores, regardless of if they do sex work. Nagle discusses the limitations of "binaries of female identity" (4) and the grey area of "implicit sexual-monetary exchange, such as legal marriages" (4) in *Whores and Other Feminists*. Kay Stanton also points out the sex work-adjacent status of wives (40).

adversative ‘but.’ Othello was not...[that] type from vaudeville and the minstrel show, a figure of ridicule...but a black who looks white” (144). I worry that by focusing on the small details that may complicate reading Bianca, I sound like Ridley examining the vagaries of physiognomy to determine Othello’s humanity. I won’t quote him directly, as it’s revolting. Is the categorical difference between “sex workers” and “women” similarly irrelevant? Perhaps in drawing the distinction I reveal my own prejudice. At a certain point I stalled out on this project, and there began a long period of inactivity characterized by an unwillingness to even reread my own work which I could not fully articulate. Partially this was in relation to external factors, but I was also, I think, subconsciously reacting to my own implicit bias with denial and refusal to engage. The professor for whose class I wrote the first version of this paper asked me why, if there are no certainties, I am arguing for this particular vision and what it would mean in reverse—asking me, essentially, to look at the consequences of what I am doing and interrogate what underlies the question I am asking. I could not answer. It felt like an inescapable mismatch: how do I “save” Bianca without arguing she needs saving? What concerned me, also, is how I justify the time and attention to matters in the play other than race, when I believe strongly that discussion of race in the play is vital, which is somehow still a contentious topic. I absolutely do not want to come down on the side of those who argue against Othello’s phenotypic Blackness nor those who seek to downplay the import of race to the action of the play. Of course Othello is not “just” Black, but he is Black. Fortunately for my sensibilities, Bianca is not wholly extricable from the play’s issues with race, as I will discuss later.

All of this is to say, queer theory and “its explicit commitment to self-critique, capaciousness and flexibility” (Sanchez 1) is the necessary mode for this work, and not only because it is where the most development has occurred in the field of late. There is also the matter

of how sexual mores impact criticism; there is a web of societal sexual hang-ups which includes sex work as well as more obviously queer sexual matters, and handling this unconscious bias comes most naturally to a mode informed by queer studies.<sup>9</sup>

There has been much, sometimes acrimonious, debate in queer theory over the last two decades regarding historicism and temporality. As is somewhat to be expected, there are valuable ideas on all sides of these debates, and I find Sanchez's summary of the situation (102-110) and subsequent proposal that "we see our disagreements as 'attempts at persuasion' whose end is not the conversion of our interlocutors but rather refinement of our own positions and continued, more nuanced debate" (110) more convincing than any of these arguments in themselves. Quite likely as a result of postcolonial and queer indictments of teleology and unproductive periodization, it has become evermore common to examine Shakespeare within postmodern contexts.<sup>10</sup>

Whether one agrees with Traub that Menon's unhistoricism "bespeaks an antipathy to empirical inquiry that, viewed as the primary tool of the historian, is posed as antithetical to acts of queering—as if queerness could not live in the details of empirical history" ("New Unhistoricism" 34), or whether one agrees with the general supposition that there is no such thing as empirical history,<sup>11</sup> this theory "[r]efusing to guarantee either fixed difference or sameness" (Menon 124) allows for utilizing a fuzzier framework, informed by postmodernity, to examine the past. In juxtaposing these, I hope to prioritize neither, and instead highlight that "chronologically

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<sup>9</sup> It seems worthwhile to note that the Library of Congress system places books on LGBT issues and sex work on the same shelf. Also, like queer people, sex workers are seen as intrinsically or "essentially sexual" (Grant 9). Lorenz discusses this with regard to queer identities and current anti-LGBT legislation.

<sup>10</sup> Some really fascinating work in this vein is by Corredera, who has examined *Othello's* lingering influence in media such as the podcast *Serial*, an episode of *Key & Peele*, and the film *Get Out*, which of course also comes from Jordan Peele. Kyle Grady has also published on *Othello* and anachronism.

<sup>11</sup> Traub makes a very valid point about the general lack of attention to interdisciplinary historical enterprise among those following Menon; see "New Unhistoricism" pp. 34-6. I agree with Traub! But I also appreciate the permission to engage anachronistically, which need not follow every dictum of Menon's. What Menon did that was very effective was challenge several underlying assumptions which were beginning to stagnate the field, and it resulted in a lot of exciting work.

complicated Shakespeare” (Menon 163) which “is never authentic or original but always insistently multiple” (Menon 158). This insistent multiplicity must inform readings of Bianca, as our view of the past is multiplied by our understanding of the present. The Shakespeare which I analyze is not the words printed in the first folio, nor the performance thereof, but the palimpsest created by the words printed in every edition, with every editor’s choices and commentary, as well as hundreds of years of performance, weighing the words down.<sup>12</sup> I attempt to follow Spiess’s suggestion that “by focusing on processes of sedimentation – how privileged terms accrue citational weight, and thus the appearance of stability – scholars can explore both synchronic and diachronic meanings without ascribing to essentialist paradigms” (19). Personally, when considering the notion of citational weight, I found it helpful to look to other disciplines. In literature and cultural studies it is difficult if not impossible to quantify the effects of erroneous citational weight, but in the hard sciences, where objective reality is closer to being observable, we can see these effects starkly. Take the Sphex wasp, subject of an oft-repeated anecdote in which scientists trap the bugs in an infinite loop of mechanical decision-making, taken as fact then used as metaphor for programmable behavior; it turns out the wasps only behave in this way some of the time, but conflicting evidence has been routinely ignored, and the anecdote repeated as fact for over a century (Keijzer, Lum). Or, in a heartbreaking example, it is likely that many more thousands of people died of Covid-19 than was inevitable because of advice rooted in poor research; experiments from the 1940s specifically concerning tuberculosis were generalized and used as the basis for overall understanding of what constitutes an airborne disease, resulting in bad public health advice and unnecessary, neurotic sanitizing of surfaces when the contagion was in fact in the air (Molteni). Even in these fields with supposed empiricism, researchers become

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<sup>12</sup> A similar point is made by Pechter (*Interpretive Traditions* 138). I’m also sure I’m paraphrasing someone else who specifically used the word “palimpsest” in this context, but I’ve been unable to relocate this.

inclined to repeat received wisdom without examination. It seems inevitable the problem would be more pronounced in a field like Shakespeare studies, where objectivity is even more limited. Anyone could redo the original studies about tuberculosis or wasps, but we can't recapture the original Shakespeare, no matter the exhortations to remove temporal and editorial meditation.<sup>13</sup> It is at least as worthwhile an enterprise to examine the latest adaptations of Shakespeare as the first quarto.

Bianca is omitted entirely in many adaptations of *Othello*, notably including the nineteenth-century Italian opera *Otello*, where one would think an opportunity to include a third female vocal part would be desired. Some omissions are inarguably a matter of cutting for time, but the choices directors make on what to emphasize can make statements in themselves. Bianca has three main narrative functions: her involvement in the handkerchief plot, the ways she enriches or complicates Cassio's character, and her impact as one third of womanhood in the world of the play.<sup>14</sup> How and whether Bianca is portrayed has a direct impact on Iago's credibility. Cutting Bianca means Cassio becomes single, which can make Iago's accusation of infidelity more believable. Iago's credibility in turn impacts how racist the play is.<sup>15</sup> The more believable Iago is, the less stupid Othello appears. Thus, Bianca's presence and depiction has an impact on the racism of any given adaptation, and it does make sense that directors aiming for less racism might omit her for that

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<sup>13</sup> I refer here to calls from some, described by Pechter (138), to return to the "original" text, somewhat similar to Rulon-Miller's call to re-read Shakespeare whilst keeping in mind women's personhood (110).

<sup>14</sup> Bastin discusses Bianca and Cassio as one third of a matrimonial triptych. Lisa Jardine discusses the three women as "of three distinct social ranks" (25) who are nonetheless "equally vulnerable to a *sexual* charge brought against them" (25, emphasis in original). While it is unfortunate to discuss a woman as important due to her relationship to a man, what I mean here about Cassio is a little more complicated; how Bianca and Cassio's relationship is depicted reverberates through the whole interpersonal web of the play and has a large impact on how we read the other characters, as well.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Quarshie's "Playing Othello" discusses this.

reason. The clearest example is perhaps the 2001 Eamonn Walker film,<sup>16</sup> which omits Bianca and has a Cassio truthfully interested in Desdemona, though it isn't acted upon. In this film, Iago's handkerchief scheme has been replaced with an entirely different scheme, in which he manipulates Cassio in such a way as to attempt to make his accusations of infidelity true. The extraordinary lengths Iago goes to in order to convince this Othello of his lies renders Othello's belief eminently reasonable. I worry about attempts to make Othello reasonable in this manner, though, as it shouldn't then follow that killing your spouse is the correct response to infidelity. Perhaps we should stop producing this play.

It is interesting to note that the emerging scholarship about sex work in early modern England has yet to examine Bianca. A notable scholar in this area, Stephen Spiess, whose doctoral dissertation I cite, has yet to turn to Bianca as a subject, which is either a glaring omission or itself evidence of Bianca's professional ambiguity.<sup>17</sup> This perhaps illuminates his own point, "that absence itself can assume varying forms, effects, and possibilities" (Spiess 8). He is here discussing a different gap in his dissertation, that of male sex workers, but he goes on to discuss the way various scholars have privileged one form of source, either court records or fiction, and how this has impacted the general impression of sex work in that era. Things missing from one type of source can be found in the other, and some things are missing from both fictional

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that this film succeeds in mitigating all the various racist subtext of the play. Othello still loses his mind and kills his wife because he thinks she's cheating. He's also the only Black character with lines. I find the overall politics of the film a little confusing. It has reimagined the play in the present of 2001, with the male characters as police officers instead of military, played against a backdrop of racist police violence. They also change the ending such that Iago wins, perhaps their most confounding choice. Their tragedy operates through Othello's collapse under the weight of structural inequality, which invades even his home life with Desdemona, partly due to Iago's maneuvering, and the ongoing case about police brutality which undergirds the adapted plot is an interesting microcosmic examination of Othello's arc, but I think an already racist viewer's racism would not be challenged by the film. Where it succeeds, perhaps, is its presentation of the police force as inherently white supremacist, an arena where an Iago will of course eventually become commissioner, and efforts to change the status quo are doomed to failure as long as overall white supremacism maintains itself. I'm not sure, however, this message gets conveyed to an audience which isn't already inclined to think this way.

<sup>17</sup> As far as I have been able to ascertain. He is presently working on a book and his dissertation is likely a precursor to said book. It seems likely he'll get around to Bianca eventually.



representation and court records. This slippery idea about locating what's missing complicates discussion of Bianca. Stanton argues that Bianca is not a sex worker because she "never herself manifests any behavior indicative of prostitution. If Bianca ever has been a sex worker, she is not doing so during the course of the play. Never does she ask Cassio for payment of any kind for her sexual favors.... [And] no sex partner other than Cassio is ever mentioned in connection with her" (39). This all has to do with what is and isn't on the page, and it could be argued that explicit discussion of payment would simply be too gauche. Regardless, it is true that for the first three hundred years or so, Bianca was largely absent from criticism of the play (Rulon-Miller 100).

Historically, implicit biases surrounding sex work have led critics to disregard Bianca. She is largely ignored or denigrated until the late 1980s,<sup>18</sup> and her status as a sex worker isn't critically challenged until 1992, with the publication of the Coles Cambridge School Shakespeare edition, which, as Rulon-Miller points out in 1995, "turns all previous Bianca criticism completely on its head" (107). Rulon-Miller takes this and runs with it in her forceful excavation of Bianca and call for us not "to defend or sanctify" (110) the women of the play, but instead to consider them on their own terms. Rulon-Miller points out, in Bianca's case, this means emphasizing Bianca's word over the word of other characters. She ends her essay with a call to "re-read *Othello's* women, interpreting them from what they say and do within the text rather than from their androcentric critics' analysis" (110).

The next well-known critic to argue against Bianca as sex worker is Edward Pechter in 1999's *Othello & Interpretive Traditions*. Pechter excoriates prior criticism, insisting that

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<sup>18</sup> Somewhat ironically given my earlier statements about received wisdom, I've accepted Rulon-Miller's summary of Bianca's critical history prior to 1995 and incorporated it into my own timeline, appendix B, with "According to Rulon-Miller" prefacing any sources I myself have not read. Rulon-Miller reports that Bianca disappears from the conversation for decades at a time, first discussed in 1904, then not again until 1946, then with increasing frequency approaching 1995, at which point Rulon-Miller too-optimistically falls into the myth of progress.

“[a]lthough *Othello* is now routinely held to represent pathological male debasements of a healthy female sexuality, nonetheless even critics who interrogate the process by which women are called whores reproduce it almost without exception in the case of Bianca” (*Interpretive Traditions* 134). Pechter’s insistence that Bianca is maligned through accusations of whoredom could use a little nuance from third-wave feminism,<sup>19</sup> but he remains one of few to challenge the notion. Despite this, when he got the opportunity to edit an edition of *Othello*, he still chose to list Bianca as a courtesan, a practice he questions (*Interpretive Traditions* 136). He claims we have no choice when it comes to interpreting Shakespeare through centuries of previous editors (*Interpretive Traditions* 138), but there is an obvious choice between reinforcing or challenging what’s come before.

Many critics have regarded Bianca as a mere artifact of patriarchy or as a tool to besmirch Desdemona.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, I suspect Bianca’s nonadherence to contemporary generic convention in representation of sex work may render her a confounding subject for those interpreting such conventions. Even in the most recent scholarship on the play, Bianca is still frequently referred to unambiguously as a courtesan or other sex worker. A notable exception to this is Kay Stanton’s 2014 *Shakespeare’s ‘Whores’: Erotics, Politics, and Poetics*, which does argue against Bianca as sex worker, though briefly.<sup>21</sup> Aside from this are a handful of graduate student works, such as Thompson’s 2012 in-depth exploration of Bianca’s romantic relationship, which reverses predecessors’ privileging of Cassio in such analyses, followed by Bastin’s 2017 examination of

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<sup>19</sup> I’m trying to avoid either the “happy hooker narrative” or the “victim-criminal” paradigm described by West in *We Too*, pp. 11-2.

<sup>20</sup> See what I mentioned of Kemp earlier, those critics discussed by Rulon-Miller, and others.

<sup>21</sup> This brevity arguably serves to strengthen her argument; lengthy analysis like mine perhaps comes off, comparatively, as protesting too much.

Bianca's function and position in the play, framing her as Othello's foil and a vital necessity to the plot.<sup>22</sup>

In my next section, "Who Says? Editorial Intervention," I discuss editorial bias concerning Bianca's character listing and interpretation of dialogue, revisiting Rulon-Miller's timeline and building on Rulon-Miller and Pechter. I move on in "What Does That Word Mean Anyway?" to an examination of slippage in terminology surrounding sex work and misogyny in early modern England and today, in an effort to demonstrate some lost nuance in our readings of the play. In "Historicizing Bianca," I speculate on authorial intent and compare *Othello* to its contemporaries, demonstrating the differences between Bianca's depiction and that more typical of sex workers in the period. "Unhistorical Bianca" explicates a misogynistic ritual of male homosocial bonding in *Othello* through a lens informed by postmodern examples of the phenomenon, described by Rulon-Miller as "the age-old male pastime of disparaging women" (101), which I refine with more specificity. "Performing Bianca" delves into recent adaptations of the play and discusses issues of race. I conclude with a few ideas about areas of further research.

I return several times to that portion of act four, scene one in which Iago incites Cassio to mock Bianca in order to deceive the hidden Othello regarding Cassio's fictional dalliance with Desdemona. This dialogue, Bianca critics agree, is one of the most important to her character, despite her absence from the stage. It is important to note the emphasis on Bianca's being spoken about, as opposed to addressed, in both the play and its criticism. It is typical of sex workers' experience being talked about and talked over, which I'm unavoidably contributing to here.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Additionally, both of the in-depth studies of early modern sex work to which I refer are doctoral dissertations, one by Trish Henley and the other Stephen Spiess, as this is something of an emerging field. There is another relevant master's thesis which has a chapter on Desdemona and Bianca, but alas it is under embargo until 2023.

<sup>23</sup> If you're reading this paper, I must recommend you also read works like *Playing the Whore*, *Whores and Other Feminists*, and *We Too*, writings by people who have actually done sex work, rather than solely reading me.

## 2 Who Says? Editorial Intervention

Other critics have argued that Bianca is not a sex worker, but this view has been largely disregarded, meriting only a passing mention in the majority of Bianca scholarship. This resistance to new ideas likely results from what Spiess calls “processes of sedimentation” (19), the fallacious attachment to oft-repeated framing, as though the repetition itself is supporting evidence. The strongest case against Bianca as sex worker is laid out by Edward Pechter, even as he concludes that “critical and theatrical traditions that play [Bianca] as a whore may be vile, but they cannot simply be wrong” (*Interpretive Traditions* 139). Pechter’s point is that as all interpretations of *Othello* are necessarily predicated upon prior readings, and as we cannot “simply efface the contaminating mediations through which the original text has been transmitted” (*Interpretive Traditions* 138), there is no certain, original, “true” text to which we may return. Pechter is absolutely correct, yet explorations of these contaminations, and the implicit biases contained therein, can be illustrative. This is where Menon’s multiplicity comes in, by refusing to prioritize any one reading. Others, like Jeffrey Masten, engage more historically but point out the infinite flexibility of language; Masten’s practice of queer philology and his insistence of an open, multiple gloss lays out a pathway for complicating entrenched meanings.<sup>24</sup>

Editors carry as much implicit bias as critics.<sup>25</sup> Since 1623, with the first folio’s “Bianca, *a Curtezan*” (Folger 2, italics in original), editors have been eliding Bianca’s nuance in character

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<sup>24</sup> Masten’s essay on “tupping” points out the intricate web of meanings associated with the word, pointing out its associations with both “fucking” and “topping,” among others. This kind of flexible gloss applies to many of Shakespeare’s words; of particular relevance to this paper is “huswife,” with the obvious “housewife” given a side of “hussy.”

<sup>25</sup> Masten presents a compelling argument for this axiom. Also, note that while he has made excellent study of editorial bias in *Othello*, he has not turned his attention specifically to Bianca.

listings, discouraging contradictory readings.<sup>26</sup> As Pechter tells us, “our designation [of Bianca as courtesan] derives from the accumulated authority of textual scholarship” (*Interpretive Traditions* 136). While naming her “courtesan” remains common practice today, some recent editions endeavor to be less prescriptive regarding her profession, listing her as both a courtesan and as Cassio’s mistress (Hall 45, Folger 3). This loosening of editorial certainty regarding Bianca’s profession, supported by Pechter and Rulon-Miller, may originate from the 1992 edition of *Othello* intended for guided study with high school or undergraduate students edited by Jane Coles. Coles has only strengthened this position in subsequent editions.

Coles makes one important move which surprisingly goes undiscussed by Rulon-Miller. In a discussion prompt, Coles centers Bianca’s voice, as Rulon-Miller asked us to do. In act five, scene one, when Bianca stands accused as strumpet and murderer, Coles directs students: “Read up to line 129, noting the way Iago and others treat Bianca, and how she responds. Then imagine you are Bianca, arrested on suspicion of being accessory to murder. In role, write a short statement defending yourself against Iago’s charge” (3rd ed. 190). This classroom exercise seems more important to the political goals of Rulon-Miller’s essay than the question she did discuss, foregrounding as it does both ditching mediating editorial dress and empathizing with a character other editors have entirely written off like Iago’s “trash” (*O* 5.1.86).

In the newer version of the discussion prompt which so excited Rulon-Miller, Coles asks: “Some editors of *Othello* assume that Bianca is a prostitute, and refer to her in that way in the list of characters at the beginning of the play. Consider how accurate Iago is as a judge of women. Can you take his description at face value?” (Coles, 3rd ed. 152). This is altered only slightly from the 1992 version, in which not only does Coles question all antecedent scholarship regarding Bianca’s

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<sup>26</sup> I refer to an image of the first folio’s character listing present in the Folger Shakespeare Library edition; Bianca is listed solely as “Cassio’s mistress” in the book’s own dramatic personae on the facing page.

profession, she also implicitly proclaims Iago progenitor of the designation. Honest Iago initially classifies Bianca as a “huswife that by selling her desires / buys herself bread and clothes” (*O* 4.1.94-95), and he drives this rumor throughout the play. Rarely is Bianca referred to as a sex worker by any other character. Some of these few instances may even be the result of emendation after Shakespeare’s death. Pechter helpfully highlights two changes from the first quarto in which derogatory lines were newly attributed to Cassio.

First, Pechter tells us that Cassio’s line “[Bianca is] such another fitchew! Marry, a perfumed one” (*O* 4.1.140) is Iago’s in the quarto (*Interpretive Traditions* 136).<sup>27</sup> Pechter is correct, but examination of the quarto makes clear that reattribution of some portion of this line is a necessary edit. The quarto line reads: “*Iag.* Before me, looke where fhe comes, / Tis fuch another ficho; marry a perfum’d one, what doe you meane / by this hanting of me” (Q1 4.1, p.65). As Iago is not the man being haunted, at least “what doe you meane / by this hanting of me” must be Cassio’s; the question before the editor becomes where to split the line to correct the error. The other obvious placements for the division would be after “ficho” or after “perfum’d one.” If the former, Cassio merely confirms Iago’s slur, rather than uttering it, and if the latter, Cassio does not agree at all. One argument for placing the reattribution after “perfum’d one” is the use of the word “marry.” This could be wordplay involving Iago’s reported rumors of Bianca’s marriage hopes. Cassio, in the midst of denying such a thing, might be inclined to avoid the term, even in another meaning. Yet the editor chose to reinforce perceptions of Bianca as a sex worker by giving Cassio this utterance.

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<sup>27</sup> This attribution to Cassio has gone largely unquestioned, even in editions as thorough as the Folger Shakespeare Library’s. See Folger 4.1.166-168.

The other interesting change mentioned by Pechter is also made to act four, scene one after the first quarto. In this, Bianca is newly referred to as a “customer” by Cassio.<sup>28</sup> It is useful to examine the initial line beside the emended versions:

*Caf.* I marry her? I prethee beare fome charity to my wit,  
Doe not thinke it fo vnwholefome: ha, ha, ha (Q1 4.1, p.64, 1622)

*Caf.* I marry. What? A cufomer; prythee beare  
Some Charitie to my wit, do not thinke it  
So vnwholefome. Ha, ha, ha. (F 4.1, p.329, 1623)

*Caf.* I marry her? what? a Cufomer;  
I prethee beare fome charity to my wit,  
Doe not thinke it fo vnwholefome: ha, ha, ha. (Q2 4.1, p.64, 1630)

This addition has an effect on the euphemistic meaning of the line. Without “customer,” the “unwholesomeness” of Cassio’s wit loses its double entendre. The editor may have intended to add or clarify the joke, and it seems the joke was well-received enough to persist in future versions. This addition may indicate an unwholesomeness in the editor’s wit—he may, like Cassio, be under Iago’s influence.

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<sup>28</sup> Though some confusion remains, this term is widely understood to refer to both a sex worker and their customer.

### 3 What Does That Word Mean Anyway?

More than one critic has argued that Iago manipulates readers of the play as much as the characters within it. Pechter states, “all questions of motivation in *Othello*, for audiences and characters alike, seem to go back to Iago; he determines our speculations about Bianca as about everything else in the play” (*Interpretive Traditions* 139). An important component of that “everything else” is, of course, race. Iago is, if not the source, a reflection of the play’s racism. Discussing racism within and without the play, Newman argues:

[Iago] possesses what can be termed the discourse of knowledge in *Othello* and annexes not only the other characters, but the resisting spectator as well, into his world and its perspective. By virtue of his manipulative power and his superior knowledge and control of the action, which we share, we are implicated in his machinations and the cultural values they imply. Iago is a cultural hyperbole; he does not oppose cultural norms so much as hyperbolize them. (151)

Newman perhaps overestimates spectators’ resistance to Iago, given the long history of racist criticism she outlines (144), antecedent to ongoing scholarly conflict surrounding race and the early modern.<sup>29</sup> Speaking of Iago’s continued power, Pechter powerfully asserts “how fundamentally complicit we are—even now, now, very now—with the malign and contaminating motivations driving us on to the terrible catastrophe just ahead” (*Interpretive Traditions* 140), that catastrophe being Desdemona’s murder. While feminist and race scholars have done much to rescue Desdemona and Othello from Iago’s lingering influence, the disregarded Bianca remains firmly in his grasp.

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<sup>29</sup> For a concise summary of this conflict, see Corredera “Not a Moor Exactly” pp. 30-2



“Cultural norms” is an important phrase of Newman’s. As early modern race scholars have “vigilantly attended to the differences between Renaissance culture and our own” (Correreda, “Not A Moor” 32) while exploring some samenesses, so too must examination of Bianca and sameness allow myriad alterities. Parsing historicism in various feminist criticisms, Sedgwick argues that some otherwise dissimilar criticisms “are alike in seeing all human culture, language, and life as structured in the first place—structured radically, transhistorically, and essentially *similarly*, however coarsely or finely—by a drama of gender difference” (*Between Men* 11). She goes on to point out that these transhistorical analyses tend to engage in a “vatic, and perhaps imperialistic” (*Between Men* 12) temporal collapse into the present tense causing “a difficulty in dealing with the diachronic” (*Between Men* 13). Indeed, much critical disparagement of Bianca relies on a lens distorted by lack of consideration for changes in misogyny over time, a lack of the “attention to historical semantics [which] is particularly important for studies of sexual language in Shakespeare” (Spiess 19).

There are, however, significant similarities between today’s misogyny and that of the Renaissance which should not be ignored. In the early modern period, as today, there is a great deal of slippage in defining “whore.”<sup>30</sup> Henley points out that “the figure of the prostitute, both actual and represented, exposes frightening similarities between early modern and postmodern cultural configurations of women” (2). In the early modern period, as today, “whore” and other slurs refer not only to literal sex work but also to any form of promiscuous or sexually unruly behavior. The definition of the very word “prostitute” has never been restricted to full-service sex workers; it has always also connoted insatiable sexual desire (Henley 64-65). Like present culture, in “early modern culture, the prostitute embodies the tendency of all female bodies. Left to her

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<sup>30</sup> See Stanton pp. 34-42.

own devices and without a man's surveillance, all women are (potentially) prostitutes" (Henley 21).<sup>31</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "prostitute" as: "A woman who engages in sexual activity promiscuously or (now only) in return for payment,"<sup>32</sup> and "whore" first as: "A prostitute," and second as: "A promiscuous woman; a man's mistress; an adulteress." This latter triple definition, in that order, particularly encapsulates the way the word is used in *Othello*. Kay Stanton argues:

The word 'whore' . . . can be used, by Shakespeare and currently, with any of the following primary meanings and more: professional prostitute; promiscuous woman; woman who has had sexual relations with more than one man; woman who has had or seems to want sexual relations with a man other than the one laying claim to her; woman who has had, or is believed to have had, sexual relations with men, or even only one man, without marriage; woman who, consciously or unconsciously, provokes sexual desire in men; woman who has, or attempts to take or maintain, control over their own sexuality, integrity, or life; and woman who has gone, or has expressed a desire to go, into territories, geographical and/or professional, claimed exclusively for men. But each of these very different meanings slides into the overall connotation of professional prostitute. (17-18)

This all seems intuitively true, but Stanton doesn't cite anything here. It is perhaps useful therefore to examine up-to-the-minute colloquialism, such as one finds on the website Urban Dictionary.

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<sup>31</sup> Grant discusses this with regard to the present day in *Playing the Whore*; see especially chapter 2, "The Prostitute," pp. 10-9. Kate Lister discusses the history of the word "whore," Saussure, and the arguments for and against reclaiming the term. Importantly, she points out that it's sex workers in particular who have the most at stake in these discussions, and probably those of us who are not sex workers shouldn't be using it, despite its presence in the title of her blog; she argues for a return to an older meaning of the word divorced from its pejorative use.

<sup>32</sup> There is a secondary definition which refers to men, though it also directs one to see "male prostitute." Stanton points out, also referring to others, that the OED has largely been composed by men who reinscribed their own prejudices (19-21).

Examination of Urban Dictionary entries for “whore” may provide a representative sampling of online misogyny, especially regarding etymological questions around sex work, prostitution, and/or whoredom. The top entry<sup>33</sup> when I first began this research in 2018 provided two definitions for “whore”: “A) A man/woman that lacks self worth, and reduces themselves to the lowest possible level in order to attain social acceptance in the hopes that they will attract attention. B) A female that collects fees for sexual favours” (illusion8055 September 17, 2008). There is an obvious conflation here between “the lowest possible level” and sex work, yet what is truly fascinating is that this was only one of two entries on the first page of results for “whore” which mentioned sex work at all in 2018, and none of the first page entries do in 2022. The rest of the 2018 first page was largely concerned with sexual insatiability or “lacking self respect [*sic*] and morals” (successfulbirth December 3, 2015); 2022’s first page is preoccupied with promiscuity. Notably, the definition ranked seventh in 2018 tells us a “whore” is: “Any woman that has sex outside of marriage” (Concerned ^2 May 31, 2018), an opinion reminiscent of the seventeenth century. In 2022, the top entry for “whore” is: “A girl or guy who sleeps with multiple people. We’re using the word to describe guys too if it fits them. Multiple means more than one. Whores will make up a weird definition of multiple” (chFree77 July 30, 2018). The third definition in 2022 is: “An individual who compromises his or her principles for personal gain” (David237632 October 10, 2005), which is interesting, very puritanical, in how it implies having transactional sex is against society’s principles. In 2022, only the third page of results finally includes: “Another word for a prostitute. Someone who performs sexual acts for money. It also refers to a person who wastes their abilities by working for unworthy, disgraceful causes. Usually refers to a woman, but

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<sup>33</sup> It has belatedly become clear to me that I do not understand how Urban Dictionary ranks entries; it does not seem to be correlated with upvotes as I once assumed. This is confusing! I cite here with usernames and dates as provided with the entries, so as to ease relocation. Their position in the search results may not be static even within a shorter timeframe. This does cast some doubt on my assertions here.

can refer to a man. It's not exactly legitimate to call somebody a whore unless they are paid for what they do" (Lorelili May 28, 2007).

In marked contrast to "whore," the Urban Dictionary entries for "prostitute" almost universally refer specifically to sex work, both in 2018 and now. In 2018, many entries on both pages provided the other as a synonym, but in 2022, "prostitute" entries frequently refer back to "whore," but not the other way around. What seems fairly clear is that, at least for the last few years, "whore" is an entirely different category from literal sex workers.<sup>34</sup> Derogatory terms like "whore," when applied to women generally, are reliant upon sex workers' position at "the lowest possible level" of society. As much sameness as there is between today's and Shakespeare's misogynies, "whore" and other such terms are in need of complication. As Spiess points out, "the common idiom 'the world's oldest profession' construes a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon that effaces differences of practice, legality, meaning, terminology, economics, agency, and gender in England and elsewhere" (13). "Whore" and other terms have experienced such effacement.

Though, as Spiess argues, it is likely "that sexual commerce functioned as an 'open secret' in early modern London – illegal yet tolerated, visible yet unrecognized, present yet absent" (5), this tolerance did not mitigate the seriousness, however uncommon, of the "sporadic regulation by...ecclesiastical and Bridewell courts" (Spiess 5). In early modern England, "Men and women accused of prostitution were...subject to public fines, stocks, whipping, carting, cucking, or other spectacles of shame" (Spiess 7), as well as "imprisonment in Bridewell" (Thompson 73).<sup>35</sup> "Prostitution" here means not only actual sex work, but also sex outside marriage or sex with multiple partners; indeed, the proper term in question may be "'whoredom' – a term that

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<sup>34</sup> Lister and, to a lesser extent, the OED itself, support a longer-term separation of these two concepts.

<sup>35</sup> For discussion of the history of Bridewell, see Henley pp.72-5.

encompassed a range of sexual practices and desires in the period” (Spiess 6). The distinction between literal sex work and generic misogynist “whoredom” seems to have been far less pronounced for Shakespeare than what we have today.<sup>36</sup> It seems as though the whores of Shakespeare’s time were all categorized at the same “lowest possible level” as sex workers, while today we have something of a middle class, where “whores” who are not sex workers are championed by many while sex workers languish in the social basement. Today’s laws surrounding sex work, while flawed, are far more particular about which behaviors they are meant to curtail.<sup>37</sup> Critics have neglected to attend to this change, allowing their unexamined view of sex workers as the lowest of the low to inform their readings of Bianca.

All the women of *Othello*, not just Bianca, are painted with a misogynist brush, yet Bianca is the only one to whom the paint sticks through the centuries. All three women are subject to slurs implying—ambiguously—promiscuity, sexual desire, and/or sex work, including “strumpet,”<sup>38</sup> and “whore.”<sup>39</sup> It’s worth noting that Desdemona experiences the most of this. Emilia is, intriguingly, once referred to as “bawd” (*O* 4.2.21), essentially the early modern “madam” of a brothel and the term least ambiguously to do with sex work used in the play. Significantly, Desdemona and Bianca both deny the charge of “strumpet” (*O* D: 4.2.88, B: 5.2.124).

As many scholars have noted, the supposed evils of the promiscuous, sexually desiring woman—the whore—is that upon which *Othello*’s plot turns. Accusation and rumor were not

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<sup>36</sup> Possibly due to the sheer volume of women falling under a whorish umbrella, there were a great many subcategories of whore in early modern England. For a detailed accounting, see Spiess p. 55

<sup>37</sup> Which is not to say that these behaviors are all sex work specific; being Black in public, loitering, having condoms, etc. all end up under this umbrella; see Grant pp. 1-9, Dorsey. I make this claim tentatively in light of these complications; the real difference between now and 400 years ago may be in law enforcement practice, rather than in definitions. Reading Grant, in particular, suggests that today, a “whore” is anyone who angers a police officer.

<sup>38</sup> All counts refer to direct address except where noted.

Strumpet: Bianca: 4.1.96, 5.1.79, 5.2.123      Desdemona: 4.2.83, 85, 5.1.35, 5.2.81,83

Emilia, by implication only: 5.2.124

<sup>39</sup> Whore: Bianca: 4.1.166

Desdemona: 4.2.22, 74, 93, 5.2.136

Emilia: 5.2.237

merely a matter of reputation but were actively dangerous. Desdemona dies on rumor. The matter at issue upon her death is the veracity of the accusations against her, not whether or not such actions warrant a death sentence if true. This fraught circumstance renders Bianca's characterization particularly vital—why is she not punished by the narrative? If Bianca is truly a sex worker, in the social basement, why is she the only woman to survive the play? It could be an example of Shakespeare behaving unlike other writers of the period, and Bianca could be a sex worker who is also the virtuous woman who survives; Stanton, who argues for a feminist Shakespeare, would prefer this take. It could also be that Bianca was never a sex worker. I don't particularly want to take a stance on which of these is the better feminist interpretation, though I lean toward the former. What is distinctly anti-feminist is the way Bianca's virtue gets ignored or denied because she's identified as a sex worker.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> This is explored in Pechter's *Interpretive Traditions* and Rulon-Miller.

## 4      **Historicizing Bianca**

In her exploration of sex work in the culture and on the stage of early modern England, Trish Henley has surprisingly little to say about Bianca, whom she claims is “one of the few prostitutes represented by Shakespeare” (165).<sup>41</sup> Her brief examination of Bianca occurs within her discussion of the introduction of female actors to the English stage in 1660, in a production of *Othello*. Henley argues that the audience likely would have assumed these actors to be sex workers, and she supposes their performance was likely lubricious, based on the sexually suggestive prologue written for the production (162-165). This would have associated all the women with promiscuity and/or sex work, not just Bianca, yet Henley suggests that, more than the other two women, Bianca serves as “display” or “eye candy” for the audience (165). Henley leaves any skepticism about Iago’s characterization of Bianca implicit, stating that “Iago tells us Bianca is a prostitute” (165), then providing a close reading of Iago’s introductory soliloquy which restates Iago’s claims without questioning them. This lack of close attention may stem from Bianca’s nonadherence to Henley’s assessment of the general representation of sex workers and whores. Bianca is unlike her contemporaries; explication of this is impossible without challenging her perceived status, something beyond the scope of Henley’s project.

Shakespeare does not write Bianca in the manner typical of the period. Spiess asserts that “prostitutes pervade...the drama of Shakespeare” (9), while pointing out the comparative lack of nonfictional documentation of sex workers. I would like to complicate this. While terms denoting sexually unruly women or sex workers indeed pervade Shakespeare’s works, he seems to avoid

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<sup>41</sup> For in-depth discussion of all Shakespeare’s sex workers, see Stanton, pp. 43-68.

explicit onstage representations.<sup>42</sup> A reluctance may be implied by his changes to Bianca from her origins in the Cinthio text, *Gli Hecatommithi*, from which *Othello* is adapted.<sup>43</sup>

*Gli Hecatommithi* identifies its courtesan in straightforward prose. While she is indeed Bianca's predecessor, importantly, Bianca is synthesized from two women, not just this courtesan. The other woman is described thus: "The Corporal had a woman at home who worked the most wonderful embroidery on lawn" (Cinthio 39). This second woman is not a sex worker. Instead, she seems to be a servant of the Corporal, from whom Cassio originates. Perhaps "having" this woman "at home" implies something salacious, but the Corporal's additional relationship with the courtesan renders this reading less convincing. If the Corporal has a sexual relationship with his embroiderer, Cinthio need not include the courtesan at all, unless giving him a harem makes his pursuit of Desdemona more believable.

A fuller understanding of Bianca's origin explains Cassio's request of her to copy the handkerchief's embroidery. If indeed she is a sex worker, she must at least also be an embroidery savant. This is particularly interesting in light of embroidery's association as "the craft of gentle and noble women" (Findley 361).<sup>44</sup> Returning to Iago's "huswife that by selling her desires / buys herself bread and clothes" (*O* 4.1.94-95), it must be noted that "[t]he designation 'housewife' ('huswife' in the original texts) floats ambiguously between pejorative (hussy, whore) and favorable meanings, an effect reinforced by contradictory signals about Bianca's position in the overall action and reflected in editorial and critical uncertainty" (Pechter, *Interpretive Traditions*

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<sup>42</sup> In his book refocusing discussion of gender in Shakespeare around the cross-dressed boy, David Mann asserts that "Shakespeare is much less inclined to introduce prostitutes into his plays than many of his contemporaries" (175).

<sup>43</sup> Of course, my suppositions of Shakespeare's intentions only matter insofar as they represent one potential understanding of the text.

<sup>44</sup> While Findley's *Women in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* is broadly interesting, she doesn't challenge Bianca's designation as a courtesan, in fact arguing for the more specific Venetian courtesan "type" proposed by Jardine, which I think is too prescriptive, and I find the decision to quote some edition of *Othello* in which Iago calls her "hussy" in place of "huswife" odd (40).



134).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Kemp asserts: “The designation of ‘housewife’ in the early modern period was not necessarily indicative of marital status, but rather was considered an occupation. In an age before department and grocery stores existed to offer mass produced goods and materials, a great deal of labor was necessary to provide food and clothing for members of the household” (34), which further muddies the waters. An admittedly tenuous gloss of Bianca’s “desires” could be an innuendo-laden “embroidery on lawn,” and “selling her desires” perhaps “selling whatever she desires.” While “a housewife selling her embroidery” is perhaps a ludicrous interpretation of Iago’s line, the ambiguity is there. It’s possible the aspect of Cinthio’s courtesan which Shakespeare wished to reproduce was simply the fact of her romantic relationship with the Corporal.

This would not be the only instance of Shakespeare eliding a full-service sex worker while adapting a text. He also does so when adapting Whetstone’s *Promos and Cassandra* into *Measure for Measure*. Shakespeare removes Whetstone’s full-service sex worker, Lamia, replacing her with Mistress Overdone, the bawd (Henley 92 n.107). *Measure* thus presents full-service sex work only through the proxy of the bawd, one step removed.

In *Pericles*, Shakespeare presents a more typical example of the treatment of sex workers while still dodging a direct depiction. Those familiar with debates on authorship in Shakespeare know *Pericles* has a sticky history in this area, but Vickers convincingly argues (291-332) that Shakespeare is responsible for the second half of the play (Vickers 305), and only the first two acts are a product of his co-author (Vickers 304). Thus, it is Shakespeare who writes three revolting people apparently in the business of enslaving women for sex work, and they discuss these women in typically dehumanizing terms. About to buy Marina, *Pericles*’s ingenue, they explain the need

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<sup>45</sup> Worth noting is that “huswife,” like “whore” and “strumpet,” is applied to the other two women as well, if only by implication (*O* 2.1.114).

for “fresh ones”—meaning enslaved sex workers—because their current staff “with continual action are even as good as rotten” and “pitifully sodden” (*Pericles* 4.2). The workers have become so “unwholesome” as to have killed a client: “Ay, she quickly pooped him; she made him roast-meat / for worms” (*Pericles* 4.2). This language is notably harsher than even Iago’s when discussing Bianca and the other women of *Othello*. This could be Shakespeare incorporating the views of his co-author, but even so, it shows that he’s willing to say these sorts of things about sex workers when he does not want to be ambiguous. Perhaps he uses this harsh language to put off an audience happy to go along with more polite imprecations, as these speakers from *Pericles* are meant to be more crudely evil than the insidious Iago, but that has little bearing on the truth value of either’s statements. Perhaps there is merit to arguments supporting the idea of Bianca as a high-class Venetian courtesan, to whom people are expected to be more polite.<sup>46</sup>

Marlowe also writes an explicitly designated courtesan, and her treatment differs greatly from Bianca’s. *The Jew of Malta* has Bellamira clearly represented as a (presumably full-service) sex worker, indicated directly by the dialogue. Importantly, we learn this not through secondhand gossip but from Bellamira’s own mouth. Upon her first appearance, she tells us her “gain grows cold...for one bare night a hundred ducats have been freely given: but now against [her] will she must be chaste” (*Jew of Malta* 3.1.1-4). It is clearly, expressly, Bellamira’s will to do sex work, unlike Bianca, who exclaims she is “no strumpet” (*O* 5.2.124). Additionally, Ithamore says “I know [Bellamira] is a / courtesan by her attire” (*JM* 3.1.26-27), which editor Siemon elucidates as “apparently a distinctive form of dress, whether the red taffeta worn by some English prostitutes or the more elaborate gowns of their notorious Venetian counterparts” (Marlowe 58 n.27). This is complicated by England’s “1546 proclamation...[which] would have made officially prescribed

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<sup>46</sup> See Jardine, also *The Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, “Courtesans,” pp. 118-9. For a counter-argument, see Traub’s *Desire and Anxiety*, p. 158.

sartorial signifiers uncommon, if not altogether obsolete” (Spiess 7). It is unclear what audiences would understand or expect from Ithamore’s statement. Regardless, this statement in the dialogue is an example of the common practice from the period of characters verbalizing blocking cues and other production notes, which Shakespeare also uses, but Bianca does not have any such description of her attire, or indeed her appearance.

Costuming aside, when juxtaposed with Bellamira’s, Bianca’s firsthand treatment by other characters renders her profession more ambiguous. Though gossiping about her harshly, characters directly addressing Bianca treat her with courtesy and respect, a marked difference to Bellamira’s treatment. In place of a more courteous greeting, upon first sight, Bellamira’s regular client Pilia-Borza immediately calls her “wench” and curtly offers money (*JM* 3.1.12). By contrast, Bianca, in a supposedly similar situation with Cassio, is repeatedly addressed as “sweet” (*O* 3.4.166,173, 4.1.149), as Desdemona is by her husband, and no mention is made of payment.<sup>47</sup> Arguably, this could merely be a matter of characterization of these men, one of whom is a criminal, the other a noble soldier, each written by a different playwright. Too, there may be a suggestion within *Othello* that a man of Cassio’s caliber would be expected to show courtesy even to the lowly. Emilia says, “[Othello] called [Desdemona] whore. A beggar in his drink / Could not have laid such terms upon his callet” (*O* 4.2.127-128). This may imply that only a beggar would insult a lover to their face, regardless of status. However, Iago speaks to Emilia—his own wife—and Desdemona more harshly than Emilia’s apparent shock at the term “whore” would suggest. Emilia appears to be holding Othello to a higher standard than Iago.<sup>48</sup> Cassio, belonging to Iago’s rank, would be held

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<sup>47</sup> For extended examination of Cassio’s address of Bianca, see Thompson pp. 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> This may be due to Othello’s even higher rank or the increased scrutiny he is under because of his race. For discussion of difference in treatment between Iago and Othello due to race, see Smith pp. 111-2.

to the same standard as he, this lower than Othello's. The fallaciousness of Emilia's implication, then, indicates that Cassio may be more courteous to Bianca than would be expected.

## 5 Unhistorical Bianca

Criticism of Cassio often includes Bianca, but generally only in her relevance to Cassio's character. Bastin and Thompson both position Bianca more centrally in their analyses and compare Bianca and Cassio's relationship to the two marriages portrayed, agreeing that the couple "completes a triptych of romantic pairs" (Bastin 1). Both scholars agree that Bianca and Cassio's interactions are the most consistently loving of the three couples'. The point of contention both scholars must counter is the marked difference between Cassio's words to Bianca and his words to Iago in act four, scene one. It is unclear which of these interactions to privilege, but of the two characters, Iago is the proven liar.

While heeding warnings from Sedgwick of becoming "vatic, perhaps imperialistic" (*Between Men* 12) and Spiess of "ascribing to essentialist paradigms" (19) in transhistorical analysis, I'd like to examine Iago and Cassio's interaction in act four, scene one in relation to a specific postmodern phenomenon, which I believe is likely present throughout the intervening four hundred years, though such a broad-reaching argument is well beyond the scope of this project. This phenomenon is at least endemic to present-day US society. I argue that it is also present in *Othello*.<sup>49</sup> Recalling the forms of misogynistic homosocial bonding explored in Sedgwick's *Between Men*, today men often engage in derogatory discourse regarding their female romantic or sexual partners while in male-dominated spaces as a form of male bonding. This denigration, what

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<sup>49</sup> This possibility is suggested but not explored in detail by Rulon-Miller; her comments are limited to describing Cassio's behavior as "the age-old male pastime of disparaging women" (101), and she focuses more on Iago's behavior in the scene.

we could call ball-and-chaining, is not limited to locker rooms, colloquialism aside.<sup>50</sup> I think it's worthwhile to discuss ball-and-chaining as a specific, separable phenomenon. Speaking of female partners in this way is a milder form of "males wooing other males over the comedy of being cruel to women" (Loofbourow) which results in disturbing incidents of violence like those alleged of Brett Kavanaugh, as Loofbourow discusses. When a woman is not present, this comedy of cruelty becomes a means for men to enter into a covenant of secrecy, that "long tradition of male in-group protection" (Loofbourow) which they must mutually maintain. Keeping their ball-and-chaining secret from their female partners provides yet another avenue for the men's mockery, that of their partners' ignorance of the comments. The potency of these interactions only increases in narrative representation, buoyed by an audience made complicit through a dramatic irony contained to these unknowing women.

Since their advent, sitcoms have been rife with husbands secretly maligning their wives to entertain other men. This trope is pointedly exaggerated in a comedy sketch entitled "I Said Bitch" from the television show *Key & Peele*. The plot centers around the titular men "trad[ing] stories about arguing with their wives and setting them straight" (Key). They repeatedly assert, then deny, having addressed their wives as "bitch" while arguing over the women's stereotypical womanly foibles, such as taking too long to dress for an outing. The men, fearful of discovery, go to increasingly bizarre lengths to avoid their wives in order to continue this discussion. This particular example is an interesting one because the intention behind it, I think, is to subject ball-and-chaining to scrutiny through humor and perhaps defamiliarization a la Shklovsky. It illustrates the intensely

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<sup>50</sup> My starkest recollection in this area is of my time working as a technician in electrical assembly on a team composed almost entirely of men; complaints about wives and girlfriends were exchanged between my coworkers daily. While I understand the general human need to complain as a form of stress relief, and that everyone, regardless of gender, sometimes complains about their partner, ball-and-chaining seems to me to be a kind of shibboleth of patriarchal values: a bros-before-hoes test, if you will. Even presenting as a woman, I sometimes count as a "bro" in this equation, perhaps because I correlatedly seem sexually unavailable, i.e. not a "ho."

performative nature of these conversations and the extent to which men strive to hide them from their female partners.

Overtly, the sketch is unsophisticated humor centered around being “hen-pecked” in which the men must keep their conversation secret to avoid repercussions from the hens. However, the hyperbolic lengths the men go to in preventing their conversation from being overheard—running as far from their wives as outer space—may serve to highlight the insincerity of their complaints. The men’s braggadocio appears to inversely correlate with proximity to their wives. Their direct interactions with the women indicate it’s unlikely either man actually said “bitch.” Both react to their wives with comedically exaggerated submission, becoming accommodating and fearful as soon as the women appear. Yet before a male audience, and the public audience of the show’s viewership, these men are under significant social pressure to appear dominant toward their partners.

The men of *Othello* operate under similar pressure, impugning the veracity of private male communication. In Iago’s pivotal deception of Othello via manipulation of Cassio in act four, scene one, “we see Cassio performing his...most masculine self yet” (Thompson 10).<sup>51</sup> Iago must incite Cassio to behave in such a way as to convince Othello of the adultery, and he knows he can do so by wielding social pressure. Iago initiates discussion of Bianca and frames it as secret or shameful:

IAGO: .... How do you now, Lieutenant?

CASSIO: The worser that you give me the addition

Whose want even kills me.

IAGO: Ply Desdemona well and you are sure on’t.

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<sup>51</sup> The following analysis of 4.1 covers much of the same ground as Thompson and, to a lesser extent, Bastin, though both assume, without coining a cute term, the influence of ball-and-chaining as a cultural phenomenon.

[*Speaking lower*] Now, if this suit lay in Bianca's power,  
How quickly you should speed!

CASSIO: Alas, poor caitiff! (*O* 4.1.103-109)

Iago's conspiratorial, hushed tone signals to Cassio the appropriate direction for the discussion. He intuitively understands that, rather than admitting to a loving relationship with Bianca, he must mock her and assert that her love far outweighs his reciprocal affection. Iago incites Cassio to increasingly intense repudiation, knowing Cassio will mirror him. "[A]s Iago laughingly tells increasingly outrageous tales of Bianca's expectations for her relationship with Cassio, Cassio joins in" (Thompson 11) with increasing vitriol. Once Iago invokes the specter of marriage, Cassio must assure Iago he plans to end the relationship. As Bianca approaches, he takes care to leave Iago with a final impression of his disdain—"Tis such another fitchew! Marry, a perfumed one" (*O* 4.1.140)—if indeed the line is his, as I question in my first section. If the line is Iago's, this further shows Cassio's unwillingness to risk Bianca overhearing such words. Regardless, once Bianca is known to be in earshot, both men affect civility.

Bianca enters angry about being asked to copy another woman's handkerchief, and Cassio is dismayed to have displeased her. More interesting is Iago's immediate, "After her, after her" (*O* 4.1.153) upon Bianca's furious exit. Not only does Iago express no surprise at Cassio's desire to follow Bianca, it is he who initially suggests it. The falsity of Cassio's mockery is implicitly understood by Iago, and the two men demonstrate the same type of unspoken confidentiality agreement as Key & Peele. Like them, Cassio behaves submissively when directly faced with his partner, attempting to placate her with his plaintive, "How now, my sweet Bianca? How now? How now?" (*O* 4.1.149). Despite this revealing display, Cassio pauses before pursuing Bianca to reinforce his façade of dominance for Iago, claiming he only follows Bianca because "[s]he'll rail



in the streets, else” (*O* 4.1.154)—an assertion which is clearly untrue. It seems his dismissal of Bianca is a matter of reputation.

Having recently disgraced himself, Cassio is under even more pressure than usual to impress other men. Iago, as a man with Othello’s ear, is an especially important potential source of support for Cassio. We know Cassio “think[s] it no addition, nor [his] wish, / To have [Othello] see [him] womaned” (*O* 3.4.188-190). Cassio’s shame around this may have much more to do with his homosocial bonds—with his reputation—than with Bianca. She appears not to believe Cassio when he proclaims, “Not that I love you not” (*O* 3.4.192), but this may be the truth. Cassio cannot admit to such a thing publicly while trying to regain Othello’s esteem.

Othello’s position on soldiers and women—whatever their status—has been made abundantly clear.<sup>52</sup> Preempting objections from the Duke about Desdemona accompanying him to war, Othello says, “And heaven defend your good souls that you think / I will your serious and great business scant / When she is with me” (*O* 1.3.268-270). He will ignore his wife and therefore remain an effective leader. Immediately following this, he implicitly indicts all wartime romance:

No, when light-winged toys  
Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness  
My speculative and officed instruments,  
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
Let huswives make a skillet of my helm,  
And all indign and base adversities  
Make head against my estimation! (*O* 1.3.270-276)

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<sup>52</sup> The following thoughts on Othello’s opinion of women parallel Traub in *Desire and Anxiety*; see pp. 33-7.

Love is a bright, shiny “toy” which could distract serious soldiers from their important work, “corrupt and taint” this work—and perhaps the men doing it. The paralleling of “huswife” with “indign and base adversities,” too, is telling. Othello positions Desdemona—and all women—as a potentially corrupting influence. Given this, Cassio’s unwillingness to display his woman is reframed. He has no hope of convincing Othello to reinstate him if he appears wantonly dull.

Despite his words to Iago, Cassio may love Bianca, reciprocate her desire for marriage, or even be the unrequited party himself. Bianca’s apparent willingness to cut all ties with Cassio—“If you’ll come to supper tonight, you may; if you will not, come / when you are next prepared for” (*O* 4.1.151-152)—supports this latter reading. Another line that can be read in support of a loving Cassio is the “customer” line I discuss in my first section. A line of Cassio’s is emended from the first quarto to include the word “customer,” most likely as a matter of clarity in presenting a joke. The ambiguity of the chosen term, “customer,” may have relevance to the sincerity of Cassio’s expressed feelings, as well as the understanding of the line. The full line reads: “I marry her? What? A customer? Prithee, bear some charity to / my wit; do not think it so unwholesome. Ha, ha, ha!” (*O* 4.1.120-121). As it can refer to either a sex worker or their client, this “customer” may refer either to Bianca or to Cassio (Hall 127 n.120, Folger 180 n.140). Pechter argues that “‘customer’ in the sense of ‘seller’ was very likely obsolete or peculiar usage even for the play’s first audiences” (*Interpretive Traditions* 135). If the line refers to Cassio—“who, I, the whore’s customer?” (Hall 127 n.120)—then the subject of mockery in the line becomes somewhat less clear. With either meaning, the central concern of the line is the integrity of Cassio’s relationship—“integrity” here meaning both honesty and durability—yet whomever is referred to as “customer” bears the brunt of the implied judgment. While several critics<sup>53</sup> (and Iago) raise the specter of the

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<sup>53</sup> E.g. Mann: Bianca is “in many ways a stereotype, the whore who falls for her client” (175).

foolish whore in love with a client, the foolish client in love with a whore is more realistic. Pechter points out as “implausible” the notion “that whores regularly fall in love with one of their clients” (*Interpretive Traditions* 135). Intuitively, it seems much more likely for someone to develop romantic feelings for a person providing a service rather than the other way around, given the power dynamics and petty annoyances surely involved.

Everything in Cassio’s manner toward Bianca in person contradicts his speech with Iago. As Pechter states, “Iago’s contemptuous characterization [should] sound like gross misrepresentation” (*Interpretive Traditions* 135). The probable reasons that his slander does not disturb us are themselves disturbing. It’s fine if Bianca is depicted as a sex worker—but she really shouldn’t be depicted as a whore.

## 6 Performing Bianca

A complicating factor in studying plays as literature is that plays are inherently incomplete on the page. A script is a launch point for a collaborative effort between playwright, director, actors, and designers which becomes a complete text only ephemerally or iteratively. In a novel, a character's physical description and whatever of their motivations and mannerisms appear on the page are static, whereas these change with every staging of a play, especially one which doesn't include prescriptive stage directions. There's a common acting exercise wherein actors must convey varying meanings with nonsense or repeated words, as though to make playwrights feel inadequate. Directorial choices<sup>54</sup> can change meaning even at the most basic level.

Unfortunately, the only live performances of *Othello* I've attended have been by high school or undergraduate students, which thus have leaned toward earnest overreach. The most recent of these featured competent leads and a vapid, boa-clad Bianca; I shudder to think what the young actor was told by her director. It was most assuredly the least interesting choice for the character, not only because it relied on sexist stereotype, but because it removed all ambiguity. Were I directing *Othello*, I'd ask my Bianca to be a little emotionally cold; I'd ask my costume designer to put her in elegant, flattering clothing that mirrored the class status of the other characters; and I'd leave as much interpretation of the truth about her to the audience as possible, while maintaining Iago's unreliability. The only love-addled idiot in my cast would be Cassio, who seems even more Iago's dupe than Othello at times. I see Emilia with a certain savvy about Iago from exposure, and I'd ask her actor to play her as resentful toward him and in love with

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<sup>54</sup> For succinctness, I'm collapsing all the various authorships of actors and designers into "directorial choice," but I don't mean to devalue their contributions. The best directors choose people to co-author their production, not merely follow directions.

Desdemona. Desdemona herself I see as sincere in her love for Othello, but she's simultaneously dealing with considerable external pressures; I might emphasize her desire to gain independence from her father.

It's hard to reproduce a story essentially about domestic violence perpetrated by a Black man against a white woman without being at least a little racist; if I were to direct the play, I might feel compelled to change the ending, sacrilegious as it might seem.<sup>55</sup> Beyond that, minimizing the number of white actors, generally, can help, but casting Bianca in particular with a woman of color only compounds the existing sexism with extra racist overtones if she is also played as stupid or lust-addled, especially if both other women are white.<sup>56</sup>

I dither about what character choices could make Othello less racist, although I'd attend to Hugh Quarshie's writings on the matter and his portrayal for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2015. Quarshie's primary issue with Othello as a character is his abrupt shift "from magnanimous to murderous" ("Playing Othello") in the length of one scene, which the RSC production makes more credible through minor alterations in the script, along with some additions of military violence early in the play, suggesting it is not race so much as the nature of war that causes Othello's own violence.<sup>57</sup> Their other major change was casting Iago with a Black actor, motivated by a "determination to avoid suggesting Othello behaves as he does because he's black" (Quarshie, "Hugh Quarshie"). Quarshie immediately jokes, "Now we have two black men behaving badly"

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<sup>55</sup> Quarshie discusses Shakespearean idolatry and changes to the script in "Playing Othello." Relatedly, Corredera discusses Shakespeare's failures of universality (and *Key & Peele*) in "How Dey Goin' to Kill Othello."

<sup>56</sup> Pechter discusses several productions of *Othello* with Bianca as a woman of color; she is repeatedly described using exoticizing/fetishizing/Orientalizing language *Interpretive Traditions* pp. 132-3.

<sup>57</sup> They add, during what is otherwise a scene transition, a silent scene of waterboarding a detainee, which goes unexplained, as well as having Othello be violent toward Iago in a manner aligned with military enhanced interrogation techniques during their confrontation about Desdemona's possible unfaithfulness. There is an implication, then, that the torture and other violent behavior that becomes acceptable during a military occupation can infect the home life, causing incidents of domestic violence such as what happens to Desdemona. I think this production is fairly successful in mitigating the racism of the play but less so the misogyny; the female characters other than Desdemona seem underdeveloped and Desdemona remains too willing to die. Anti-racism and feminism need not be opposed.

(“Hugh Quarshie”), which highlights the obvious issue with this casting. I’d add that this bad behavior specifically includes killing their wives, which leaves intact the implication of some inherent racialized tendency toward gendered violence. It does successfully remove the “possibility of suggesting that a clever and cunning white man could easily dupe a black man” (Quarshie, “Playing Othello”). While both characters do evil in the course of the play, the nature of the two characters’ evils is very different; Iago’s evil is cerebral, while Othello’s is base, so while questions remain about how effectively this casting reduces the racist subtext, it does at least allow for Black intelligence in a refreshing way.

I see a parallel between Bianca and Othello in how they can be reduced to caricature or elevated, depending on directorial choice, and examining the ways an accomplished Black performer like Quarshie grapples with Othello can perhaps illuminate a way forward for Bianca. I would not argue, as Bastin does, that “Bianca, not the title character, has been most maligned by critics” (4), but both have been maligned, and this malignancy operates through similar channels. Bastin’s idea of Bianca as a foil for Othello has some potential. However, that absolutely should not mean Bianca and Othello are cast as the only people of color in the play.

The parallels between Bianca and Othello perhaps exert some underlying pressure in Paula Vogel’s 1993 *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*, given Vogel’s choice to give Bianca a turn as the murderously jealous lover. Sharon Friedman discusses this and two other plays, Djanet Sears’s 1997 *Harlem Duet* and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s 1988 *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, as a form of criticism (“Feminist Playwright”). Only one of these artistic interventions in the discourse of *Othello* includes Bianca as a character. Vogel’s *Desdemona* invents the unseen life of all three female characters within the world of *Othello*, imagining some

of the possibilities left open by Shakespeare without altering the events of the plot. She focuses in on the play's women and renders them human and sexual in a way *Othello* fails to do.

## 7 Conclusion

Those who view Bianca as a sex worker “cannot simply be wrong” (Pechter, *Interpretive Traditions* 139), but nor are they simply right. Whether Bianca is meant to be a sex worker or not, centuries of being marked and read that way have limited her potential to illuminate various aspects of *Othello*. Editors have allowed their bias to influence their reading of a text already composed by a biased editor, layering infinite reduction onto what should be an infinite opening. A recognition of the limitations of our own context is necessary to a full explication of any (un)historical contextualization, as no historical context can be understood without these limitations; at the same time, we need not impose further limitations on our understanding by denying insights gleaned from our context. How Iago and Cassio look, held between Kavanaugh and Key & Peele, matters as much as how Bianca looks, held between Bellamira and Desdemona. What a whore is changes as much as it the same. Bianca exists perpetually as whore and non-whore, unfixed, multiple.

I’ll finish with some ideas for further study. Firstly, I’m interested in digging deeper into the work that has been done on *Othello* in performance studies and dramaturgy. Given that I’m presently pursuing a degree focused on English literature, I emphasized critics working from the literary tradition, but I think a full understanding of the text—in the grander sense of the word—requires more attention to this other angle. Relatedly, I’d like to do more comparative work with Vogel’s transformative play *Desdemona*, especially given what Friedman calls its “synergy between theater and theory” (113). Realistically, I’m more likely to pursue a theatrical response in Vogel’s vein than additional criticism on *Othello*, and that endeavor would need attention to the



play's dramaturgical history even more.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, it's become clear over the course of this writing that I missed many small mentions of Bianca in larger works covering all of Shakespeare's women, or all of *Othello*, when they didn't come up in my initial searches for Bianca-specific work, and while I have endeavored to correct this oversight, an obvious additional avenue of research is delving into more of these. Finally, I think the most urgent avenue of further research moves away from *Othello* and into more general study of the depiction of sex workers.<sup>59</sup> My own attitude shifted radically over the course of this writing, partially because I was appalled at the amount of dehumanizing language casually applied to Bianca and other characters due to the perception of sex work. In many of the works I mention which examine all the women of Shakespeare, Bianca is treated to a sentence or two describing her dismissively. Digging into this would not only strengthen my initial point about Bianca needing more attention, but it also highlights the need, overall, for sex-worker-positive—note the difference from sex-positive—insights to permeate all our academic niches. I'm hardly perfect in this matter—but I've seen proof I could do worse.

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<sup>58</sup> Perhaps a sequel, since Bianca conveniently survives. It might be interesting to foreground Bianca in a project otherwise focused on the aftermath of *Othello*; one could even include a romance subplot with a wounded Cassio.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Spiess and a handful of other scholars are already pursuing this topic.

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## **Appendix A. Character Listings**

### **Editions listing Bianca only as “a courtesan”:**

- Second Norton Critical, 2017, edited by Edward Pechter
- Arden Shakespeare, 1965, edited by M. R. Ridley

### **Edition listing Bianca only as “Cassio’s mistress”:**

- Folger Shakespeare Library, 2017, edited by Mowat and Werstine

### **Editions listing Bianca as both “a courtesan” and “Cassio’s mistress”:**

- Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007, edited by Kim F. Hall
- New Cambridge Shakespeare, 2003, edited by Norman Sanders

### **Editions listing Bianca only as “in love with Cassio”:**

- Cambridge School Shakespeare, 1996, 2014



## Appendix B. Timeline of Publications

1566	Cinthio's <i>Gli Hecatommithi</i>
1590	Marlowe's <i>The Jew of Malta</i>
1608	<i>Pericles</i>
1622	First Quarto
1623	First Folio
1630	Second Quarto
	Some centuries of performance and discussion.
1904	According to Rulon-Miller, first criticism directly about Bianca, by A. C. Bradley
1946	According to Rulon-Miller, next criticism on Bianca, by Harley Granville-Barker
1958	M. R. Ridley's edition of <i>Othello</i> with its problematic introduction
1972	According to Rulon-Miller, next "prominent critic" writing on Bianca after Ridley, Leslie Fiedler
1974	According to Rulon-Miller, Julian C. Rice
1985	Timothy Murray's " <i>Othello's Foul Generic Thoughts and Methods.</i> "
1985	Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's <i>Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire</i>
1987	Karen Newman's "'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in <i>Othello.</i> "
1992	First Jane Coles edition of <i>Othello</i> , with classroom exercises
1992	Valerie Traub's <i>Desire &amp; Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama</i>
1993	Folger edition. <i>Othello</i> . Folger Shakespeare Library.
1994	Carol Thomas Neely's "Women and Men in <i>Othello.</i> "
1994	Paula Vogel's <i>Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief.</i>

1995	Nina Rulon-Miller's " <i>Othello's Bianca: Climbing Out of the Bed of Patriarchy.</i> "
1996	Lisa Jardine's <i>Reading Shakespeare Historically.</i>
1996	Leah S. Marcus's <i>Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton.</i>
1997	Leah S. Marcus's "Who Was Will Peter? Or, A Plea for Literary History."
1997	<i>Whores and Other Feminists</i> , an essay collection edited by Jill Nagle.
1999	Sharon Friedman's "Revisioning the Woman's Part: Paula Vogel's <i>Desdemona.</i> "
1999	Laura Gowing's <i>Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London</i>
1999	Edward Pechter's <i>Othello and Interpretive Traditions.</i>
2003	Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's <i>Touching Feeling.</i>
2004	Leah S. Marcus's "The Two Texts of <i>Othello</i> and Early Modern Constructions of Race."
2005	Leah S. Marcus's "Shakespearean Editing and Why It Matters."
2006	Melissa H. Ditmore's <i>Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work.</i>
2007	Carla Freccero's "Queer Times."
2007	Bedford/St. Martin's edition of <i>Othello</i> , edited by Kim F. Hall
2007	Trish Thomas Henley's <i>Dealers in Hole-Sale: Representations of Prostitution on the Elizabethan and Jacobian Stage.</i>
2008	David Mann's <i>Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception.</i>
2008	Madhavi Menon's <i>Unhistorical Shakespeare.</i>
2009	Sharon Friedman's "The Feminist Playwright as Critic: Paula Vogel, Ann-Marie MacDonald, and Djanet Sears Interpret <i>Othello.</i> "
2010	Alison Findley's <i>Women in Shakespeare: A Dictionary.</i>
2010	Theresa D. Kemp's <i>Women in the Age of Shakespeare.</i>
2011	Edward Pechter's <i>Shakespeare Studies Today: Romanticism Lost.</i>
2012	Key & Peele's "I Said Bitch."
2012	Sarah E. Thompson's "'I Am No Strumpet': Bianca and Cassio's Relationship in <i>Othello.</i> "

2013	Fred Keijzer debunks the Sphex anecdote.
2013	Key & Peele's "Othello Tis My Shite!"
2013	Stephen Spiess's <i>Shakespeare's Whore: Language, Prostitution, and Knowledge in Early Modern England</i> .
2013	Valerie Traub's "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies," written in response to Menon, Freccero and others.
2014	Thug Notes <i>Othello</i> video.
2014	3rd edition of Jane Coles's <i>Othello</i> .
2014	Jennifer Flaherty's "How Desdemona Learned to Die: Failed Resistance in Paula Vogel's <i>Desdemona</i> ."
2014	Melissa Gira Grant's <i>Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work</i> .
2014	Kay Stanton's <i>Shakespeare's 'Whores': Erotics, Politics, and Poetics</i> .
2015	Elizabeth Mazzola's "Going Rogue: Bianca at Large." Discusses the name Bianca in multiple Shakespeare works.
2015	Royal Shakespeare Company production featuring Hugh Quarshie as Othello and Lucian Msamati as Iago.
2016	Vanessa Corredera's "'Not a Moor exactly': Shakespeare, <i>Serial</i> , and Modern Constructions of Race."
2016	Christy Desmet's "Shakespeare and the Digitized World."
2016	Kyle Grady's "Othello, Colin Powell, and Post-Racial Anachronisms."
2016	Jeffrey Masten's "Glossing and T*pping: Editing Sexuality, Race, and Gender in <i>Othello</i> ."
2016	Hugh Quarshie's "Playing Othello."
2016	Ian Smith's "We Are Othello: Speaking of Race in Early Modern Studies."
2017	Cristina León Alfar's <i>Women and Shakespeare's Cuckoldry Plays: Shifting Narratives of Marital Betrayal</i> .
2017	Jennifer Bastin's " <i>I Must Be Circumstanced:</i> " <i>Bianca's Effect on Othello</i> ."
2017	Kyle Grady's "Why Front?: Thoughts on the Importance of "Nonstandard" English in the Shakespeare Classroom."
2018	Mario DiGangi's "Early Modern Bodies That Matter."
2018	Lili Loofbourow's "Brett Kavanaugh and the Cruelty of Male Bonding: When Being One of the Guys Comes at a Woman's Expense" appears in <i>Slate</i> .
2019	Milena Kalicanin's "Paula Vogel's <i>Desdemona (A Play About a Handkerchief)</i> : A Feminist Reading of Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> ."

2019	Melissa E. Sanchez's <i>Shakespeare and Queer Theory</i> .
2020	Vanessa Corredera's "'How Dey Goin' to Kill Othello?!" <i>Key &amp; Peele</i> and Shakespearean Universality."
2021	Tom Lum's <i>TikTok</i> video about the Sphex anecdote.
2021	Megan Molteni's. "The 60-Year-Old Scientific Screwup That Helped Covid Kill" appears in <i>Wired</i> .
2021	<i>We Too: Essays on Sex Work and Survival</i> , an essay collection edited by Natalie West.
2022	Cheryl Dorsey's "Op-Ed: California's loitering law is discriminatory and makes everyone less safe" appears in the <i>LA Times</i> .
2022	Taylor Lorenz's "Meet the Woman Behind the Libs of TikTok, Secretly Fueling the Right's Outrage Machine" appears in the <i>Washington Post</i> .