(UN)DOING DESDEMONA:
GENDER, FETISH, AND EROTIC MATERIALTY IN OTHELLO

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By

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Dedicated to Cecilia

(and Francisco, in memoriam)
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(Un)Doing Desdemona: Gender, Fetish, and Erotic Materiality in Othello began as a suspicion—a mere twinkle of an idea—while reading Othello for Mimi Yiu's graduate seminar Shakespeare's Exotic Romances. I am indebted to Dr. Yiu for serving as my thesis advisor and for seeing this project through to its conclusion. I am also thankful to Ricardo Ortiz for serving on my oral exam committee and for ensuring that my ideas are carefully thought through. Thanks also to Lena Orlin, Dana Luciano, Patrick O'Malley, and M. Lindsay Kaplan for their continued instruction and encouragement. The feedback I received from Jonathan Goldberg (Emory University) and Mario DiGangi (City University University of New York—Graduate Center) proved particularly helpful during the final phases of writing. Furthermore, my thesis owes its life to my peers, not only for their generous feedback, but also for their invaluable friendship, especially Roya Biggie, Olga Tsyganova, Renata Marchione, Michael Ferrier, and Anna Kruse. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Donna and Jess Guevara, for their unconditional love and support even though they think my work is “over their heads.”
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I.

Introduction

“Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”
-Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

While reading Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, I was struck by her assertion that the human subject is politically constituted by and through the corporeal and social vulnerabilities of our collective bodies. Exposure to violence and our shared experience of loss initiates a kind of community, a social “we” that understands what it means to lose somebody and to lose one's self in the process of grieving. I am particularly intrigued by her idea of mutual undoing—the ways in which we are dispossessed from one another when our relational ties are exploited. The human condition is predicated on this precarious interdependence: we live for each other at the risk of losing each other. Butler writes, “Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.”

Butler's notion of undoing is the impetus for what follows. I take up many of her primary, conceptual questions such as: “Whose lives count as lives?” and “Who counts as human?”2 We are both interested in how the human is socially constituted and how some lives, particularly those which do not meet predetermined criteria of humanness and intelligibility, are cast as inferior and subhuman. While Butler contextualizes her analysis in light of recent global violence, I situate my inquiry in the early modern period. I am interested in looking at representations of early modern queer desire, particularly in Shakespearean drama, and how non-normative desire elicits physical, psychic, and discursive violence. My goal is to show how violence enacted upon queer bodies in the early modern period—however historically distant—can be correlated to (although not necessarily equated to) contemporary violence committed against queer identified persons today.

My point of access into this mode of inquiry is through the early modern female body, especially the body which is seen as masculine, disobedient, and ontologically aberrant. Medical, juridical, and theological discourses attempt to categorize and moralize these socially and corporeally queer bodies, but fail to give them voice. The voices of queer women are virtually absent from these historical records. Searching for them within early modern historical documents, we are continually confounded by silence. Limiting our discussion to these types of texts would deprive us of understanding how queer women lived—how they exercised their agency within a normalizing, patriarchally regulated culture. Such is the reason we must listen for their echoes in the

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nooks and crannies of other discourses. I would argue that the Renaissance theatre gives us access into the early modern cultural psyche, mimicking societal anxieties and how these tensions were culturally staged and played out. Stage plays provide us with representations of both the material and behavioral codes which governed early modern models of sociality.

As my primary literary text for analysis, I have chosen William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Written for the London theatre, *Othello* stages many of the time's most pressing cultural anxieties: female disobedience, miscegenation, and cuckoldry. In the first scene of the play, Brabantio, Desdemona's aristocratic father, is fraught with worry that his well-bred daughter has eloped with a Black Moor. Iago connivingly heightens his anxiety by suggesting that they could be “making the beast with two backs,” (1.1.115) a gross act of miscegenation.³ Later in the play, Iago deviously plants Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's quarters, and Othello is frightened that he has been cuckolded by his fair and potentially disobedient wife. Yet, I am mostly interested in how these desirous anxieties are resolved through violence. I want to know what Desdemona means when she says, “Alas, he is betrayed and I undone,” mere moments before her death (5.2.96). How is her body undone by violence? What happens to her body once it is undone? And what exactly does it mean to be “undone” in the first place? Perhaps unfastened? Or unfinished? The capaciousness of Butler's idea of undoneness surrounds a multiplicity of possibilities for signification, each navigating particular tenors and nuanced meanings within the play.

Furthermore, I am curious as to how Desdemona's handkerchief participates in her

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undoing. Its series of exchanges, transactions, thefts, and losses signify the seemingly apparent “truths” of her desires. The handkerchief, as both a material object and stage prop, signals her supposed infidelity, consequently triggering dire choices with lethal repercussions. Moreover, not only does the handkerchief subliminally organize desires and identities in Othello, but it also configures the ways in which we, as a modern audience, interact with the play as a premodern text. Even after hundreds of years, spanning the paradigmatic shift from the premodern to the modern era, audiences are still able to psychically and emotionally connect with Othello and its characters. Our ability to engage with a premodern text calls into question our relationship to history. Just how modern are we? Are we really so different from our early modern predecessors? When you think about it, how different can their desires be from ours? Are we never jealous like Othello? Devious as Iago? Vulnerable as Desdemona?

The Question of History

When discussing premodern desires, one automatically summons the specter of history and inevitably conjures the empirical demands of historicity. My approach to history is a queer one in which I conceptualize Desdemona's handkerchief as undoing empirical histories that sternly marshal proper teleology. There exists an ambivalent connection between materiality and temporality. Yet, before proceeding, I feel obliged to define my use of the word “queer.” The multivalence of the term itself makes it useful in a variety of situations. “Queer” simultaneously functions as identity, non-identity, and a critique of identity itself. As a modern category delimiting bounds of non-normative
sexual orientation, “queer” typically designates lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexed persons. However, a hipper, trendier generation of American young people appropriate “queer” in a way which resists the limitations of pre-prescribed sexual identities. For them, “queer” signifies a resistance to bourgeois social norms and a rebellion against culturally dictated sexual edicts. Furthermore, in contemporary academic circles, “queer” works as a mode of critique, challenging structures and apparatuses of power which code and naturalize bodies and their respective identities under the auspices of heteronormativity. “Queer” scholarship dislodges these seemingly fixed signifiers from their culturally inscribed foundations and exposes deviant bodies in relation to the mechanisms of power which produce them as such. Finally, I hope that in this analysis “queer” maintains its sense of strangeness. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term emerged in the early modern period from the German “quer,” which signified something that is oblique or out of alignment. This usage coincides with modern theoretical uses of “queer” which primarily aim to knock normative modes of signification out of alignment. Therefore, a queer approach to early modern desire means questioning and critiquing operations of patriarchal power in order to uncover the out of line, the strange, and the sexually peculiar.

Taking my cue from theories of queer temporality, I seek to defer, disrupt, and possibly even destroy longer standing empirical histories in favor of instantiating narratives of alterity, those which represent and even valorize the figure of the violently undone, premodern other. In their introduction to *Premodern Sexualities*, Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero conduct a close reading of Michel Foucault's *The History*
of Sexuality to argue that queer scholarship can disrupt historical linearity by privileging histories of alterity. They write, “Foucault argued instead for the possibility of radical discontinuities between epochs and 'epistemes.' Foucault's accompanying destabilization of 'truth'—means, of course, that historiography can never tell a truth that is not contingent. Foucault's work disturbs the very normativity of historical narrative.”⁴ These contingencies are relational and permit for the insertion of new narratives of alterity into the shifts and slippages of the historico-discursive matrix. To this end, Fradenburg and Freccero propose a new “project of dislodging and indeed queering the truth-effects of certain historicist practices. Especially in question are those historicist practices that repudiate roles of fantasy and pleasure in the production of historiography.”⁵ In this way, the fabric of Desdemona's handkerchief functions as a metaphor for the historico-discursive matrix—time possessing the narratives of history—and its cloth-like pliancy, the capacity to fold and unfold, is the very quality which can disrupt proper teleology.

In a series of discussions with fellow French philosopher Bruno Latour, Michel Serres conceptualizes time as polychronic—past, present, and future convergent yet simultaneously disjunctive. He rejects the idea of time as linear, sequential, or evolutive in favor of a temporality which is multiple, erratic, and, at times, even paradoxical. Serres imagines time as twisted, wrinkled, and pleated—constantly in the process of folding and unfolding. Coincidentally (or perhaps not), he uses a handkerchief to metaphorize his theory:

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⁵ Ibid, xvii.
If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant.\(^6\)

It is my hope that Serres' understanding of time as a handkerchief can inform my inquiry into early modern materialisms—the ways in which material objects not only possess memory and bear ghostly traces of the past, but also the ways in which they configure our relationship to time itself. Jonathan Goldberg points out that Serres' “way of doing the history of science speaks to the history of sexuality” and converges with queer theory's imperative to dismantle normative conceptions of linear time.\(^7\) To assume that there exists some paradigmatic divide between modernity and premodernity is to declare that premodern subjectivity is somehow incongruent with modern subjectivity—that our desires are somehow formed, experienced, and contextualized differently than those of our predecessors. However, if the past can be folded onto the present—superimposed, if you will—and if modern sexualities can collapse into premodern desires, then the threads of the handkerchief can weave us into a fabric of past, present, and future. Serres argues that the object itself is “multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats.”\(^8\) The handkerchief folds us together—the fabric of the present superimposed onto that of the past.

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\(^7\) Jonathan Goldberg, “After Thoughts,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (2007) 504.

\(^8\) Serres, 60.
*Queer Historiography*

If we are to read the handkerchief as configuring time itself, then this project demands reading and writing practices that are attentive to the possibilities of queer temporality. In her recent book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam asserts that queer temporality destabilizes linear time and challenges the prescribed heterosexual narrative defined by “an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction.” The normative heterosexual subject experiences a cyclical coherence in the ritualized movement from birth to childhood, from adolescence to adulthood, and from reproduction to death and eventual rebirth. On the contrary, the queer subject might refuse to adhere to this timeline. Halberstam recalls thinking as a child, “[F]uck family, fuck marriage ... this is not my life, that will not be my timeline. Queer time for me is ... the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence.” This refusal of linear temporality exposes possibilities for thinking about time in new and multiple ways and consequently creates the potential for re-conceptualizing history and its subsequent relationship to time. In *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Carolyn Dinshaw proposes a queer methodology which privileges histories of alterity. She joins Homi Bhaba in identifying new histories for historically disenfranchised groups. While Bhaba is primarily concerned with locating new narrative spaces for colonially marginalized persons, Dinshaw is interested in exposing how medieval queer desire has been rendered unintelligible in

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premodern textuality. She aims to construct a new intelligible history by making partial connections, or what she calls “touches,” across time through pre and postmodern juxtapositions—bodies, objects, and texts, both past and present, simultaneously disjointed yet conjoined in cross-temporal, affective “touches.” These touches are analogous to Serres' folds in a handkerchief—discrete moments in time superimposed onto one another, the past brought to bear upon the present. Dinshaw disregards normalized straight time and relishes in a queer anachrony which disturbs proper teleology, yet, at the same time, manages to make a seemingly distant history somehow proximal, accessible, and relevant.

The recent proliferation of scholarship in premodern queer historiography speaks to the modern desire for queer histories—the urgent need to form alliances with a past that can yield sociopolitical utility in the present. Many queer histories of the early modern period remain undone, especially those of queer women. In her discussion of the seemingly deliberate silencing of lesbian desire in early modern textuality, Valerie Traub points out that our task is “to keep alive our historical difference from early modern women and at the same time to show how historically distant representations of female desire can be correlated, though not in any simple or linear fashion, to modern systems of intelligibility and political efficacy.” Yet how can a queer past be useful to us if it is filled with gaps and silences? How can we recover these lost queer lives if they never penned their voices into text? For the historiographer, these silences become open spaces

for excavation and inquiry. Restructuring the lost lives of these miscreant personae relies on theorizing and speculating about the gaps within the scant narratives provided in court inquests, legal depositions, didactic pamphlets, and medical treatises. These texts, offering slight glimpses into 16th and 17th Century England’s criminally queer lives, are primarily concerned with the discipline and regulation of society's transgressive bodies, those which challenge implicitly heteronormative limits inscribed as seemingly fixed cultural norms. I am interested in resurrecting the voices of these silenced souls rendered inaudible by a monolithic empirical history and attributing to them authentically self-determining subjectivities.

Early Modern Materialisms

This writing and re-writing of the past can be likened to the historical materialist impulse to uncover history as a lost object (Desdemona's lost handkerchief) which, when found, can illuminate past histories of oppression. Michel de Certeau tells us, “The violence of the body reaches the written page only through absence.” Historiography is the endeavor to write the always already missing object or body into being. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin suggests, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency.”

14 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York:
He argues for an urgent and insistent attentiveness to history which revives the oppressed while concurrently exploding linear conceptions of temporality. His model of history recaptures the past as an image, or perhaps as an object, available to us in our present historical moment. Illustrating this theory, Benjamin provides us with a picture of an angel looking upon history as a pile of ruins accruing toward the sky. He writes, “Where we perceive a chain of events, [the angel] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.”

Benjamin's vision of history as a crystallized yet ruined form, instead of as a linear sequence of events, allows us to retain history as a constellatory object in the present. He contends, “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of now.”

Reconfiguring history as a discoverable object casts the queer historiographer as an archeologist who sifts through the ruins in search of new narratives and new possibilities for understanding the past. Benjamin's disavowal of linear temporality and his rejection of historical empiricism in favor of historical materialism assures us that “[n]othing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.”

History as a recoverable object is metonymic with the Freudian lost object. Sigmund Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia is predicated on loss. Mourning and melancholia are similar in that the subject grieves a lost object. However, mourning differs from melancholia in that the lost object is resolved within the subject's

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15 Benjamin, 257
16 Ibid, 261.
17 Ibid, 254.
consciousness through a gradual process of catheisis, or “letting go.” The melancholic subject, on the other hand, retains the lost object as scattered fragments within the unconscious because he or she cannot comprehend exactly what it is that has been lost. In the introduction to Loss: The Politics of Mourning, David Eng and David Kazanjian explore the creative and productive potential of the melancholic retainment of the lost object. They write:

In this regard, we find in Freud's conception of melancholia's persistent struggle with its lost objects not simply a 'grasping' or 'holding' on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains. This engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as reimagining of the future. While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects.

This continued and potentially useful engagement with the Freudian lost object resembles Benjamin's insistent attentiveness to a history of catastrophic piles of ruins. Freud's lost object and Benjamin's historical ruins are analogous in the sense that both involve a connection to a past which has been fragmented into bits of rubble, each broken piece possessing a partial yet somewhat recognizable memory. Eng and Kazanjian point out that “loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.” Although history is broken, its ruins store memories which can be pieced together.

Desdemona's handkerchief operates as a lost object not just within the drama of

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20 Ibid, 2.
the play but also within particular historical and theoretical contexts—a stage prop functioning as both historical artifact and historical absence. In the introduction to *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda argue that stage props bear inscriptions of historically significant cultural relations, “When props are regarded as properties, they may no longer seem to be so trifling: as objects owned by acting companies, impresarios, and players, as objects belonging to—proper to—the institution of the theatre, stage properties encode networks of materials relations that are the stuff of drama and society alike.”21 If props, like the handkerchief, carry the code to interpreting dramatic texts and recovering cultural histories, then a materialist approach to reading and textual analysis can help excavate queer memories and illuminate the contexts in which they are retained.

**Critically Queer**

Before restructuring the queer lives of the Renaissance, I feel obliged to address certain criticisms aimed at early modern queer historiography. Queer theory, in its insistent effort to resist canonicity, has aligned itself with post-structuralist and psychoanalytic modes of thought, primarily as a symptom of its adoption and appropriation of particular strategies born out of French feminist theory and eventually gay and lesbian studies. Rather than arguing for a queer canon, I will instead suggest that there exist a number of key theoretical texts which form the intellectual contours of queer

scholarship. Some scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt\textsuperscript{22}, argue that applying psychoanalytically inflected theories onto pre or early modern textuality is anachronistic in that the modern subject, who is scrutinized and interrogated by queer theory, has, in fact, been formed in part by early modern cultural and political economies. This rationale subscribes to an understanding of historicity which is linear via a causal, evolutive logic and which consequently denies the circuitous “going back” necessary in applying 20\textsuperscript{th} century theories to Renaissance texts. In her recent book \textit{Queer/Early/Modern}, Freccero responds to Greenblatt stating that “early modern European textuality proleptically anticipates queer theory and queer modernity” and that “the spirit of queer analysis in its willful perversion of notions of temporal propriety” disrupts the heteronormalizing imperative of linear historiography.\textsuperscript{23} Freccero utilizes the rhetorical flexibility of \textit{prolepsis} in order to disjoint time and project backward to early modernity. The anachrony is not an error or academic misstep. Her use of queer time purposefully perverts the progression of naturalized time in order demonstrate the useful tension between the deconstructive and psychoanalytic tendencies of queer theory and historicity. She argues that this “gesture—turning belatedness into \textit{avant la lettre}—is a kind of historical corrective, but it does not necessarily take seriously the pieties of the discipline that would require the solemn, even dour, marshaling of empirical evidence to prove its point.”\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{24} Freccero, 3.
Another debate surrounding queer historiography stems from the appropriation of modern terms such as *hetero* and *homo* within an early modern context. While scholars such as Foucault\(^\text{25}\) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick\(^\text{26}\) locate the emergence of homo/hetero-sexualities near the end of the 19\(^{th}\) Century, a specific kind of queer/non-queer definition, formulated through scientific, religious, and political discourses of power, occurred during the early modern period. A proto-compulsory heterosexuality defined itself against non-normative gender practices and consequently institutionalized itself as the inscribed norm. The authors of scientific medical texts were obsessed with determining the proper limits of biological sex. Intersexed bodies were anathemized yet simultaneously sensationalized as Renaissance scientists scrambled to determine whether a body in question was more anatomically male or female. Moreover, puritanical pamphlets and sermons preached against cross-dressing and tried to define appropriate apparel and gendered behaviors for men but especially women, who were thought to be extremely susceptible to immoral behaviors. These efforts attempted to implant fixed and impermeable gender categories but instead created the demand for policing the boundaries between “man” and “woman.”

What follows will be focused on the body of the early modern woman. Although the voices of early modern sexual deviants are virtually absent from textual record, defiant women, cross-dressing actors, and unseemly fetishists, who would be scorned for walking the streets of London, walk freely among the pages and stages of Shakespeare’s

plays. They grant us access into a historical mode of queer critique which lets us look at the past through their performance. I wonder if Shakespeare’s transgressive characters can stand in and speak for the voices absent from empirical histories. Perhaps Rosalind disguised as Ganymede in *As You Like It* or Viola appareled as Cesario in *Twelfth Night* could speak for the societally scorned *Hic Mulier*. Or maybe the cross-dressing practices of male actors playing female characters on the Shakespearean stage can illuminate the precarious situation of the *Haec Vir*. Traub suggests that early modern drama provides us with “a discourse of desires and acts that not only can be articulated but correlated with our modern understanding of diverse erotic practices among women.”

She recognizes that this discourse “is not authored by women” and “is highly mediated by the protocols of patriarchal control” yet nevertheless “dramatizes particular conventions according to which such desire was culturally ‘staged’.”

My discussion will pay special attention to the figure of Desdemona and the possibilities of performance and embodiment in *Othello*. Working against the vast amount of scholarship claiming Desdemona’s undeniable femininity as a “maiden never bold,” (1.3.95) I re-imagine Desdemona as a queer fetishist, a criminally queer character who transgresses patriarchal protocols of womanliness and is disciplined through violence—her murder. I am interested in unraveling the restrictions placed upon the early modern female body, thus exposing possibilities of the queer body becoming new: above,

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28 Ibid, 64-65.
below, and perhaps even beyond the normatively constituted human. What does it mean when Desdemona says she is undone? What becomes of her undone body?
II.

Desdemona's Dildo

“She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
That heaven had made her such a man.”
- Othello (1.3.129-163)

In the pilot episode of the 1970s British sitcom Are You Being Served?, the first scene opens in a large department store in which the women's clothing department is in the process of relocating into the same space as the men's clothing department, an area which both must share.29 Much of the sitcom's humor relies on the conflict arising in this hybrid, curiously gendered space. The once separate feminine and masculine spaces are displaced by the collision of both—a new queer space—which engenders dysfunction and, consequently, elicits comedic results. In the same episode but in a subsequent scene, the floor supervisor, Captain Peacock, teaches a new employee, Mr. Lucas, how to properly flute a handkerchief and insert it into his coat pocket. With dexterity and ease, Mr. Peacock flutes his handkerchief into an obviously erect phallic shape and deftly stuffs

29 Are You Being Served? is a BBC television sitcom, written by Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft, which aired during the 1970s and 1980s. The show was set in a men's and women's department store in London. (“Pilot Episode,” Are You Being Served?, BBC, Hertfordshire and London, UK. 8 Sept. 1972.)
it into his pocket. However, when the inexperienced Mr. Lucas attempts to do so, his handkerchief clumsily flops over like a flaccid penis. In the likening of skill to the erect phallus and inability to penile flaccidity, this moment displays both the handkerchief's semiological phallic nature and its culturally meaningful uses.

For critics, readers, and audience members alike, Desdemona has historically been a problematic character vacillating between virtue and vice, morality and transgression, purity and prurience. Emily Bartels, like many frustrated scholars, confronts the fact that Desdemona has “continually eluded our critical grasp.” Why is Desdemona such a problematic character? What constitutes her elusiveness? I will propose that Desdemona is queer, gendered by both feminine and masculine qualities; she occupies a space that escapes stable categorization, for she constantly displaces her gendered self. She is simultaneously a literal transvestite on the stage and a figurative hermaphrodite within the real drama of the play. This queerness, Desdemona's gender liminality, disrupts the compulsory heteronormative system of 16th Century patriarchal Venetian society and threatens to castrate (albeit symbolically) the paternal apparatus of power operating within Othello.

I recognize that Desdemona's sexual queerness is dubious. It is evident that she embraces her heterosexual desire for Othello and certainly appears to be nothing more or less than a biological female; however, queerness, especially as elaborated by queer theory, works beyond these typical conceptions of sexual preference and biological sex. It

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operates in a space outside and around the heteronormative system, constantly pushing inward and threatening that system's collapse. Furthermore, I am in no way disregarding or disputing the fact that Desdemona (as a dramatic character as opposed to a male actor portraying a woman) possesses an authentic and presumably functioning vagina.\(^3\) I am more concerned here with how gender is assembled and just as easily disassembled. While the ramifications of compulsory gender constructions can be and often are crucial to the functionality of the essentialized sex/gender binary system, we have to remember that their significance and consequently insignificance lies in their negativity as gender markers figured through a fetishized materiality located in what is ultimately an empty sign. Therefore, what marks Desdemona as transvestic and/or hermaphroditic? What sign names her as such? I will argue that it is her phallic handkerchief.

The handkerchief as the material locus for the deployment of phallic and masculine power is another controversial conjecture. In Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture, Will Fisher agrees that “handkerchiefs in early Modern England ... played in the formation of gender identity.”\(^3\) However, most scholars will contend that handkerchiefs specifically aided in the construction of the female gender.\(^3\) Fisher tells us that they “helped to produce notions of femininity and the female body.”\(^3\) A masculinized reading of handkerchiefs may seem incongruous with these

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31 This assertion functions on the assumption that a fictional character can possess genitalia whether literalized by text or embodied by a performer.  
33 For example, in “The Tragedy of the Handkerchief: Female Paraphernalia and the Properties of Jealousy in Othello,” Natasha Korda correlates the handkerchief with notions of female extravagance.  
34 Ibid, 40.
historical notions of femininity, but I will try to assemble a concept of material masculinity by positioning the handkerchief as a fetishistic object in the early modern period as well as within modern sexual and psychoanalytic discourse. First, we must turn to the origin of fetish.

*The Origin of Fetish*

What comes to mind when you hear the word “fetish”? Leather boots, dildos, and nipple clamps? Cops and robbers, cowboys and indians, or other forms of erotic role playing? Perhaps intercourse with a horse, swine, or some other non-human species? These days, fetish seems to be caught up in ideas of sexual paraphilia—diagnosable deviancies categorized by sexual attraction to inanimate objects or ritualistic behaviors. To be a fetishist is to participate in these sexually extreme acts—to maintain an excessive attraction to the object or ritual of desire. However, this was not always the case. Prior to the twentieth century, fetish was not so sexy. The sexualization of fetish can be attributed to the psychoanalytic endeavors of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, whose theories linked psychic human experience to universalizing phallic symbolism. Fetish, as we know it today, has a less sexy lineage dating back to the late medieval and early modern periods. To be a fetishist during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries meant participating in and with the objects and rituals of African religion. Moreover, such a practitioner was not a “fetishist” but a *fetissero*. William Pietz tells us that the word “fetish” originates from the “the cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ... within a novel social formation during this period through the
development of the pidgin word *Fetisso.*”\textsuperscript{35} The notion of fetish was tied up in an abstract semiological apparatus indicative of a complex social triangulation “among Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist social systems.”\textsuperscript{36}

Early modern fetish intersects with issues of race, religion, and gender in premodern discourses, and the exchange of the fetish object negotiates relationships among European Christians, Africans, and women. Because Renaissance drama stages the cultural anxieties and social politics of the period, I turn to Shakespearean tragedy to illuminate the precarious plight of non-Christian, non-European, non-heteronormative alterity in early modern England. Shakespeare's *Othello* presents us with characters who inhabit these tenuous roles of otherness: the black Moor, the disobedient woman, the sodomite, and, of course, the fetishist.

Halfway through the action of the play, Iago deviously schemes to place Desdemona's lost handkerchief in Cassio's quarters in an effort to fool Othello into believing that his wife has been unfaithful:

> I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin  
> And let him find it. Trifles light as air  
> Are to the jealous confirmations strong  
> As proofs of Holy Writ. (3.3.338-341)

In likening the signifying virtue of the handkerchief to that of sacred scripture, Iago implies that material objects, like units of language, are signs that possess the capacity to convey meaning. Language and material objects share an analogous relationship in that both participate in the fetishized materiality of objecthood yet ultimately collapse into a

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 6.
semiological chain of empty signifiers. The sign is a fetish, an object invested with meaning that is not inherent to its materiality but rather endowed upon it by external forces. Iago's description of the handkerchief as a “trifle light as air” signals its semiological negativity—the ability to function as a mere, commonplace trifle signifying “truths” not inherent to its materiality but rather placed upon it. However, the signifier's emptiness also can be interpreted as its capaciousness—its capacity to be filled with a plethora of meanings that are operational within a multitude of circumstances. Thus, the pliancy of Desdemona's handkerchief as a signifier allows it to possess competing “truths” of her erotic desires. Iago invests the handkerchief with a lie about Desdemona's infidelity. Othello takes Iago's word to be as true as “Holy Writ.” Desdemona dies an undeserved death in the grips of this falsehood. Yet the handkerchief remains just a handkerchief.

The fetish's ability to signify some sacred or supernatural truth beyond its own objecthood derives from its association with premodern African religions. During the late medieval period, the Portuguese were the first to encounter African cultures along the coast of West Africa. Pietz tell us, “The first black societies actually encountered were ruled by Islamicized groups, and the first religious [fetish] objects described were little leather packets worn about the neck.”37 The Portuguese used the terms feitico, feiticeiro, and feiticaria to refer to, respectively, the objects, persons, and rituals of witchcraft, all of which were explicitly forbidden by medieval Theodosian laws and national anti-witchcraft laws. Non-coincidentally, an allegation of witchcraft is treated as a crime in

37 Pietz, 37.
the first act of *Othello*. Brabantio fears the enchantment of Desdemona by the spellbinding charms of Othello, the “Black Moor”:

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She is abused
By spells and medicine bought mountebank
For nature preposterously to err
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense
Sans witchcraft could not. (1.3.60-65)
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Brabantio's assumption that Othello, as “a practicer of arts inhibited,” (1.3.79-80) used witchcraft to seduce Desdemona connects Othello to colonial descriptions of Muslim *feiticeros*, tribal priests who practiced witchery. The fact that most characters in the play refer to Othello as “the Moor” emphasizes his non-Christian, non-European alterity. While the term *Moor* most likely describes persons of Moroccan origin, Kim Hall points out that in early modern England, *Moor* was “an extremely malleable term used to mark geographic and religious differences ... the word *Moor* represents Christian Europe's most profound 'other'.”

In “From Ogun to Othello: (Re)Acquainting Yoruba Myth and Shakespeare's Moor,” Diana Mafe explores the parallels between *Othello* and Yoruba mythology to argue that the term *Moor* could potentially refer to the natives living along the coast of West Africa.

Yet, whether the word *Moor* is site specific or open to geographic interpretation, Brabantio's invective casts Othello as irreducibly other—someone whose native customs are considered taboo and so foreign that they are fundamentally inconceivable. The other operates outside of proper modes of signification. Brabantio can only make sense of his daughter's transgression through

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appeals to witchcraft—rendering her deviancy as supernatural and ultimately unintelligible. As soon as Othello, the racialized embodiment of African alterity, comes into proximity of the Christian patriarchal apparatus of power through his criminal elopement with Desdemona, he is treated with fear and hostility.

As other imperialist nations, including Spain, the Netherlands, and Shakespeare's England, began to participate in the trade of ivory and other exotic commodities along the Cote d' Ivoire, the Portuguese term feitiço evolved into the pidgin word Fetisso, which can be found in various Renaissance travel narratives including Purchas his pilgrim. In the chapter “What Custome the Merchants pay to their Kings. Their Measures, Weights, Scales, and Markets: Also their Sabbath, Fetissos and [S]uperstitions” included in the book Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the Sea-Coasts and In-Land Regions of Africa, Which is Generally Called Aethiopia: By English Men and Others, Fetisso signifies (although ambiguously) material objects nearly transcended to the status of deity within the collective tribal consciousness. Hegel writes in The Philosophy of History that Africans spiritually animate “the first thing that comes their way. [...] They exalt to the dignity of a 'Genius': it may be an animal, a tree, a stone, or a wooden figure.”

Buttressing this primitivizing, Hegelian notion, Purchas describes an African king consecrating a tree, “When the King receiueth not cutsome enough ... he goeth to a tree which he esteemeth to be his Fetisso, and sacrificeth vnto it, carrying it meat and

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40 Purchas his pilgrim is a multivolume work published in 1625 and compiled by Samuel Purchas. It includes accounts of early modern travel in Africa and India. Samuel Purchas, Purchas his pilgrim, Georgetown University, Lauinger Lib., 7 December 2008 <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>
drink." Prosaic objects had the potential to transform into these godly, totemic Fetisso and, as a result, inherited a fetishized spiritual significance within the theological architecture of tribal society.

This is the concept of fetish with which Shakespeare would have been familiar, if at all. Thus, if early modern notions of fetish were constructed in and around these colonial perceptions of African spirituality, then the handkerchief is, in fact, a Renaissance fetish object. Othello reveals its supernatural, African origin:

The handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love: but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies. She, dying gave it to me [...]n  
'Tis true, there's magic in the web of it.
A sibyl that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work:
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk
And it was dyed in mummy which the skillful
Conserved of maiden's hearts. (3.4.58-76)

Sewn by an oracle and given to Othello's mother by a charmer, the handkerchief is undeniably imbued with a supernatural quality. Immersed in mythical descriptions, the handkerchief emerges as an African Fetisso, a seemingly mundane material object rendered supernatural and magical. In the context of this speech, Othello's mother harnesses the mystique of the handkerchief in order to charm and seduce her husband.

42 Purchas, 942.
Here, we witness an uncharacteristic reversal of early modern gender roles—the exertion of female power over that of the male and a disciplining of patriarchy through feminine artifice enabled by and through the fetishized power of the handkerchief.

In *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, Natasha Korda argues, “Within the linguistic economy of *Othello*, we shall see women's and Africans' excessive and inappropriate attachments to material objects are woven together under the rubric of *extravagance*.“\(^{43}\) I prefer to think of extravagance in terms of excess, as that which goes above or beyond the norm. As both an African and a woman, Othello's mother experiences double modes of alterity, both specifically linked to notions of excess. The fetish, as an African charm, facilitates her sexual prowess—her magical power of seduction—thus correlating her cultural otherness to her sexuality. In *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, Ania Loomba reminds us that Muslims and Africans were thought of as effeminate and “imagined as hyper-sexual.”\(^{44}\) In this way, the dramatic text conflates femininity and Africanness under the sign of the handkerchief. Dyed with fluids drained from mummified bodies and preserved out of maidens' hearts, the handkerchief, by virtue of this curious history, is undeniably a supernatural handicraft. As the recipient of the handkerchief, Desdemona is given access to this magical, female power—an erotic agency which must be forcibly contained by patriarchy. Prosthetically assuming the handkerchief, Desdemona's body, like that of the African, carries notions of excessiveness, a superfluous disposition which demands to be contained and disciplined.


In his book, Fisher informs us of the baser uses of handkerchiefs in early modern English culture. They were (and still are, of course) used as receptacles for sweat and other bodily fluids. Furthermore, he points out that “the item itself might be seen as a 'disciplinary apparatus' (to use a term of Michel de Certeau) since it provides a means of keeping women's bodies 'dry' and within the [implicitly masculine] limits set by a norm.” Handkerchiefs discipline bodies by keeping them dry, especially women's bodies which, according to common humoral theories of the time, were believed to be inconstant leaky vessels. Upon discovering that Desdemona has lost her handkerchief and may have violated their wedding vows, Othello characterizes her as a “[h]ot, hot, and moist ... young and sweating devil,” whose corporeal excesses must be contained though “[m]uch castigation, [and] exercise devout” (3.4.32-36).

An ideology of female discipline was pervasive during the early modern period. In “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” Peter Stallybrass observes that the Renaissance woman's body was constructed of signs that marked her as male property; she represents “the enclosed body, the closed mouth, the locked house” and her body is the site of male primacy. Females were emblems of confinement. They had to be contained and forcibly conditioned to remain unaware that they too were agential bodies like their male counterparts. By impounding them in domestic prisons, men could

45 Fisher, 41.
guarantee that female agency could never be fully realized. This also required that women not be exposed to the potentially “corrupting” institutions of early modern English society, especially the theatre, Desdemona's dramaturgical home. The fear that women could not differentiate performance from reality and would consequently mimic what they saw on stage panicked patriarchy, “[T]hose Buxsome and Bountifull Lasses ... usually were enamoured on the persons of the younger sorts of Actors for the good cloaths they wore upon the Stage, believing them realy to be the persons they did only represent.”

Timothy Murray points out in “Othello's Foul Generic Thoughts” that the “threat of mimesis, especially its threat to a particular woman, is the focus of the first act of Othello.” Hence, Desdemona's discipline takes center stage.

Conceptualizing methods of discipline through compulsion and exchanges of power, Michel Foucault constructs the architecture of the Panopticon, a model of regulation by means of surveyal. In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, he introduces us to the figure of the syndic, the representative figure of power and social control. The syndic is charged with the task of patrolling a plague-stricken street and assessing the condition of its inhabitants through a process of confession and report. He summons the bodies to show themselves; however, if a body does not appear, he must ask why.

The syndic figure, bearing many faces throughout *Othello*, rears its inquisitive

47 *The Actors Remonstrance or Complaint for the Silencing of their Profession, and Banishment from their Severall Play houses* (London: Printed for Edw. Nickson, 1693), 6, Georgetown University, Lauinger Lib., 7 December 2008 <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>
head in the name of female discipline. The first scene of the play opens with Iago and Roderigo acting as the Foucauldian syndics, summoning Brabantio to report for his daughter's absence from his purportedly “locked house”:

BRABANTIO. What is the reason of this terrible summons?
What is the matter there?
RODERIGO. Signior, is all your family within?
IAGO. Are your doors locked? (1.1.81-83)

The two syndics arouse patriarchal anxiety in order to provoke a search. The image of the locked house is synonymous with the enclosure of his daughter's body. Iago and Roderigo inquire about the possibility that Desdemona could have broken free from her containment and might be “making the beast with two backs”(1.1.115) with Othello, the “old black ram” (1.1.87). The threat of miscegenation looms as the possibility takes shape that Desdemona “hath made a gross revolt,” (1.1.131) a queer choice contra naturam that could result in malformed offspring, “nephews” that “neigh” (1.1.111). When Brabantio discovers that “gone she is,” her body's absence is indicative of a subversion that must be curbed. In this moment, the role of the syndic is deferred to Brabantio, who must immediately patrol the streets and call upon Desdemona and Othello to confess their deviance. He pronounces, “At every house I'll call, I may command at most” (1.1.178-179)

Somewhere within the absence between the first two scenes of the play, Brabantio travels to Othello's home seeking a confession of this most foul transgression. Instead, he

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50 “Defer” is being used here in the Derridean sense in terms of différence: différencé meaning both “to defer” and “to differ.”
finds the lodging empty. There are no bodies to speak. No one to confess. Cassio then becomes the new self-appointed syndic and confronts Othello to answer for his absence:

The galleys
Have sent a dozen sequent messengers
This very night, at one another's heels
And many of the consuls, raised and met,
Are at the duke's already. You have been hotly called for,
When, being at not your lodging found,
The Senate hath sent about three several quests
To search you out. (1.2.39-46)

Foucault notes that during the “discursive explosion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ... [i]t was time for these figures [i.e. mad men and women, sexual children, criminals, those who do not prefer the opposite sex], scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were.” In an act that prefigures this phenomenon, Othello faces the syndics and confesses, “I have ta'en away this old man's daughter / It is most true; true I have married her” (1.3.79-80). Despite Othello's most compelling admission, Brabantio is still not convinced. He doubts that his daughter could contradict nature in such a way:

A maiden never bold,
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
Blushed at herself; and she, in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, everything,
To fall in love with what she feared to look on? (1.3.95-99)

Brabantio cannot comprehend how Desdemona could subvert patriarchal civilizing codes by surrendering to a queer desire for the racial other. Mere common sense and her privileged Christian upbringing should have prevented such a foul transgression. In order

to defend himself, Othello, assuming the final deferral of the syndic role, calls Desdemona, the body in question, to testify. While she is *en route*, Othello explains how she fell in love with him through his bold and masculine storytelling:

> From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes
> That I have passed.
> I ran it through, even from my boyish days [...]  
> This to hear
> Would Desdemona seriously incline,
> But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
> Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
> She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
> Devour up my discourse [...]  
> She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
> 'twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful;
> She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
> That heaven had made her such a man. (1.3.129-163)

What I find more compelling and startling than Desdemona's love for the racial other is her articulated desire to be a man. According to Othello's speech, Desdemona wishes that heaven had formed her into a robust and adventurous man like her husband.  

This is the first instance in which Desdemona names her desire to be a gender contrary to her biological sex. Torn between her domestic “house affairs” and Othello's heroic stories, Desdemona vacillates between masculinity and the femininity, traversing not in-between the poles of the sex/gender binary but rather wavering in a marginal, queer space simultaneously outside and within the domestic and patriarchal spheres. This shifting is by no means proportional nor symmetrical to the binary; it is a deformation and reordering of Desdemona's language and performance as a subject. Thus, she is perceived

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52 I recognize the possibility for multiple interpretations here. However, the ambiguity of this very line calls into question her gender; either heaven makes *her* a man, or heaven makes a man *for her*.

53 Gender is understood here as the set of cultural and social scripts inscribed onto sexed bodies organized on the basis of genital difference.
as the physical embodiment of deviance, the ontological disruption of prescribed “nature.” But the mere fact that she exists as a body and can name her desire to be a man requires that she, as a sexual aberrant, be dealt with accordingly by her society's disciplinary apparatus.

Desdemona is dangerous to patriarchy because of the threat of female mimesis. The theatricality of her performance in giving Othello a “world of sighs” for his “pains” could potentially be contagious to other female subjects (1.3.160). The Duke fears that his own daughter might be susceptible to Desdemona's unnatural desire. He suspects, “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.171). If other women mimicked Desdemona's desire for the racial other, then the other would have access to the white patriarchal apparatus of power through miscegenation. It is through the female body that the hybrid other, the miscegenated, hermaphroditic, and queer body is born. This anxiety is what Lee Edelman would categorize as the problem of reproductive futurity: the obsession with “natural” reproductive offspring and the political fetishized emphasis placed on the image of the child.54 The patriarchal system in Othello operates with the assumption that miscegenation will indubitably produce “nephews” that “neigh,” reproductive aberrations and images of the grotesque. The system desires that its futurity embody itself in the racially, sexually, and generically pure iconic child.

At last, the body in question comes forward; Desdemona, the symbolic impregnation of the queer, speaks:

54 Lee Edelman's No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive is a polemic against the methods by which political emphasis is placed on the image of the child and how this perpetuates compulsory heteronormative policies to the detriment of the queer opposition. Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham: Duke UP, 2004)
My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education:
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty,
I am hither to your daughter. But here's my husband:
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.180-189)

Desdemona acknowledges but then ultimately rejects her patriarchal upbringing and education. In her speech, we see an explicit denial of and challenge to the system. She inherits the feminine role passed down to her from her mother and professes her allegiance to Othello. To the dismay of her father, Desdemona embraces her power as an agencial subject and refuses enclosure; the door to the “locked house” is thrown open. She is unafraid to confess her deviance even in the unforgiving face of patriarchy:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world...
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honors and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. (1.3.250-256)

She qualifies her desire as violent, chaotic, and stormy, capable of disrupting the politically, socially, and religiously organized structures of societal normativity. That she dedicates her soul to a Moor, the early modern emblem of non-White, non-Christian irreducible alterity, is a violent blow to the patriarchal projects of domesticating and confining female bodies. Yet, what I find most interesting is that Desdemona “consecrates” her “soul and fortunes” not to Othello but to his parts, the objects or units which comprise his being. This phrase anticipates a later comment by Iago, “Our
general's wife is now the general—I may say so, in this respect, for that he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces,” (2.3.280-282) implying that Othello has relinquished his command to both Desdemona and her parts. The synecdochic emphasis on “parts” re-focuses our attention on the attributes which constitute her body and consequently her subjectivity. It highlights the importance of objects in constructing the early modern persona. If the handkerchief is to be considered one of Desdemona's “parts,” then it materially constitutes the appearance of her exterior which allows her interior to be read by men as dangerous, disobedient, and unfaithful.

Desdemona is an honorary member of what Foucault would call “a world of perversion that partook of that legal or moral infraction, yet was not simply a variety of the latter. An entire sub-race was born.”\(^\text{55}\) Desdemona is one of these “libertines from the past” from which modern “perverts” take their queue:

> Underneath the libertine, the pervert. He deliberately breaks the law, but at the same time, something like a nature gone awry transports him far from his nature; his death is the moment when the supernatural return of the crime and its retribution thwarts the flight into counternature.\(^\text{56}\)

Desdemona is this contra naturam figure who breaks the patriarchal law and whose imminent death will re-stabilize the interrupted operation of the axis of power. She is the radical, rebellious lover; only her death can restore the “natural” order. However, what interests me here most is Foucault's wording, “the supernatural return of the crime,” the notion that something “above nature” is inherent to the queer act of transgression. We

55 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 40.
56 Ibid.
therefore return to the “supernatural” conception of the handkerchief as the fetish object which enables the transgressive act.

*The Dildo*

The handkerchief displays an interesting tension between its paranormality as an African charm and its civilizing functionality as a domestic trifle. Fisher points out that “[h]andkerchiefs were ... well known tokens of love” during Renaissance England.57 Such is the case for Othello and Desdemona. The handkerchief was an amorous token exchanged during their courtship. However, the way in which Desdemona so preciously reveres the handkerchief and constantly carries it about her person indicates a displacement of her erotic desire for Othello onto the cloth itself. After she accidentally drops it after trying to bind Othello's head, Emilia finds it and comments:

> I am glad I have found this napkin.  
> This was her first remembrance from the Moor...  
> For he conjured her she should ever keep it—  
> That she reserves it evermore about her  
> To kiss and talk to. (3.3.307-313)

Yet, while it serves as a token of their love, it also affirms Desdemona's disobedience to her father and polite society. She is resolute in her subversion because she knows that Othello's love is secured in the fabric of the handkerchief. She has power, lest she lose it. The power of the handkerchief emerges from its liminality both as a token of love and also as a receptacle for bodily fluids, teasing “the border between the courteous and the

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57 Fisher, 42.
carnal, the sacred and profane.” I will argue that Desdemona’s own liminality, her refusal to be grasped by critical categories, is intimately tied to her ambiguous gender and to her complicated relationship with the handkerchief as her object of fetish.

In another essay “Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance in England,” Stallybrass and Rosalind Jones uphold that fetish objects are “detachable parts” such as “rings, jewels, gloves,” and handkerchiefs. They are prosthetic. Moreover, Pietz ventures as far to say that fetish objects can function as “external organs of the body.” Combining these prosthetic and organistic functions, I will argue that the handkerchief is a metaphor for the detachable penis—a codpiece, a dildo, a fetish object—which masculinizes and has the ability to figure the patriarchal power embodied by the phallus.

The fetish as penis is a Freudian contention. When the child discovers that his mother does not possess a penis, he assumes she must have been castrated. He therefore internalizes a repressed fear of castration and perpetually attempts to conceal the perceived deficiency. The fetish becomes a substitute for the maternal phallic absence and functions to “cover” the lack. Keeping in mind that the handkerchief first belonged to Othello before Desdemona and has a psychoanalytically significant maternal linkage, we can read it as initially covering his mother's phallic inadequacy. Thus, keeping pace with Freud's argument, we can read that it is, in fact, a substitute penis. The handkerchief's literal function to discipline the body and to cover its impurities parallels

58 Fisher, 48.
60 Pietz, 10.
its ability to both literally and figuratively cover the vagina, the perceived locus of the maternal penile absence. It conceals what is there (or rather what is not there). In turn, Othello represses his fear of castration and defers his anxiety onto the handkerchief, the fetish object, because it obscures what he refuses to acknowledge. The fetish replaces his mother's castrated penis. Nevertheless, in a sort of ritualistic rite of passage, Othello's mother “uncovers” herself and gives him the handkerchief. She charges her son to give it to his future wife. Hence, he gives it to Desdemona as a token of his love; however, as the new primary female figure in his life, she becomes the reborn embodiment of the maternal phallic absence, displaced from mother to wife, who will in turn become the mother of their future children. Desdemona inherits a figural replica of the male organ to cover her respective lack, yet, in her possession, the handkerchief transforms into the revitalized emblem of Othello's fear of castration. Deceived by the wicked and cunning machinations of Iago, Othello anticipates his cuckoldry, a castration of his reputation as a husband, military general, and ultimately his standing as a man.

Jacques Lacan's theory of the phallus positions the female in relation to the phallus and develops a psychoanalytic lens through which we can read Desdemona's situation. Extending the Freudian theory that the penis is a fetish, Lacan allows for the penis to function on a more figurative level as the phallus within the order of the symbolic. With regard to the formation of female desire, he argues that the “little girl considers herself, even for a moment, to be castrated, in the sense of deprived of a phallus, by someone whom she at first identifies as her mother – an important point – and
then as the father.”62 Thus, the phallus, functioning as a “privileged signifier,” is at the heart of desire. The woman desires what she does not possess and finds it “in the body of the person to whom her demand for love is addressed.”63 Following suit, Desdemona identifies the signifier of her desire in Othello, who, in his fear of castration, consequently relinquishes his masculine phallic power into the fetish object. The implication is that phallic power is detachable, transportable, and exchangeable. It merely resides with the individual who is perceived to have the phallus. So what does this mean for the woman who possesses the object of fetish? Is she masculinized? Can the fetish object serve as her detachable penis?

Lacan suggests the possibility for a queer third, one which does not “have” but rather “appears to be” the phallus. He contends that the female who desires to be the phallus must shed all attributes of femininity in the “masquerade,” the performance of seeming.64 I will suggest that the fetish object is an enabler for the woman who chooses to harness its fetishized power and turn it against her incarcerators; it can liberate the enclosed female body by providing access to once exclusively patriarchal territories. Through a semiological chain of signification, the phallus is displaced as the “privileged signifier” in favor of the fetish. Thus, the fetish embodies that which the phallus signifies through the act of displacement, and allows for the phallus to be re-situated from the male to the female, from Othello to Desdemona. The penis is the phallus is the fetish is the handkerchief.

63 Ibid, 279.
64 Ibid.
Reading the handkerchief as a dildo may seem anachronistic—forcing a premodern text into a modern sexual paradigm—however the concept of the dildo is not as modern as we may presuppose. The word “dildo” emerged during the early modern period and can be historically corroborated with the simultaneous emergence of “fetish.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “dildo” is a word of obscure origin, although its first uses can be traced to a few select early modern ballads and plays, including Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale. In Act 4 of The Winter's Tale, a servant announces the entrance of Autolycus, “He has the prettiest love songs for maids, so without bawdry, which is strange, with such delicate burdens of dildos and fadings, 'jump her and thump her'” (4.4.193-194-197). By claiming that the songs are “without bawdry” but then obscenely invoking the “dildo,” the servant puns on the bawdiness of balladry.

Furthermore, like the fetish, the dildo can be linked to colonial encounters with foreign cultures. In A new account of East-India and Persia, in eight letters being nine years travels begun 1672 and finished 1681, John Fryer associates unfamiliar religious tribal practices with a perceived hyper-sexuality of racio-religious others. Fryer writes:

[I]nfatuated by the Delusions of the Devil, being captivated at his Will ... they not only make Oblations to him, but give up their Souls and Bodies to his Devotion: As might about this time have been beheld at an Idol Worship of Priapus, (where the Women prostitute themselves to him, and receive the Pleasure of Copulation, all that while being as it were possessed) at Semissar; on the other side of the Water from our House, where he lay with Two and twenty, who reckon it a great Honour, and the Husband thinks himself happy in his Cornucopia.65

65 John Fryer, “Shews the Pleasure and the Product of the Woods: The People bewitched to Idolatry; the Sottishness of the Atheist. I am sent for to Bombaim; after some endeavours to go thither, and some
Not only does he correlate religious difference with the devil, but he portrays the women of this culture as prostitutes, donating their bodies to Priapus for his sexual pleasure. Priapus, the Greek god of fertility, is likely a misnomer here but functions to appropriate a characteristically excessive or inordinate sexuality to the indigenous people. The “Husband,” who enjoys a cornucopian orgy with twenty-two women, figures the immoderate superfluity of African excess, which is both literally and metaphorically absorbed by Desdemona’s fetishistic handkerchief. Fryer continues:

There are a sort of Jougies, Priests fit for such a God, among the Linguits of this Country, who practise this daily; the Husbands entertain them courteously, wash their Feet, and the whole Family is at his Beck, as long as he stays to do the Wife a Kindness. Others slash themselves with sharp Knives, and suffer themselves to be hooked by the Muscles of the Back, and hang so some Hours upon a Vow.

The Indian Jougies mentioned here are analogous to the aforementioned African Fetisseros, priest-like figures who perform religious rituals. The “Jou” of Jougies recalls the concept of jujú, a term signifying a West African charm or an object bearing spiritual significance (i.e. an amulet). Thus, jujú is a fetish object in terms of early modern understandings of fetisso. It is possible that jujú is derived from the French jou-jou, which means “toy”—an apt association with the dildo, which is often perceived as the paradigm of the modern “sex toy.”

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time spent at Goa, am forced to Winter at Carwar, and then I return to Surat,” A new account of East-India and Persia, in eight letters being nine years travels begun 1672 and finished 1681 : containing observations made of the moral, natural and artificial estate of those countries (London, 1698)
Georgetown University. Lauinger Lib. 29 March 2009 <eebo.chadwyck.com>
Furthermore, while considering the idea of fetish in terms of African religious ritual, I find it utterly irresistible to draw the comparison between suffering “themselves to be hooked by the Muscles of the Back” to the modern fetishistic practice of suspension, the act of hanging the body from hooks pierced into the flesh—a perverse jouissance achieved through the body physically transcending itself by seemingly defying its own limitations in the same way the soul is believed to exceed the body's corporeality. In a way, the handkerchief/dildo, as an artificial supplement to Desdemona's body, suspends the teleology of proper corporeality and produces a new body affixed with a prosthetic.

In the following passage, Fryer describes a particularly interesting tribal ritual involving a dildo:

Under the Banyan Tree, an Altar with a Dildo in the middle being erected, they offer Rice and Cocoe-Nuts to the Devil, and joining some small Ladders together made of Osiers, do the like; when the Gomcar or Bayliff of the Town takes a falched Knife for Sacrifice in one Hand, and a Dunghil-Cock in the other, and cutting off its Head, fixes it at top of the Ladder, and sprinkling the Blood they all dance, and beat Brass Pots with a great Shout, saying, The Devil must be pacified with Blood, God with Prayers.

The dildo, erected on the center of the altar, is consecrated and sanctified in a way which is analogous to the fetish in premodern African spiritual culture. The ceremonious aspect of transcending the material phallus to totemic status affirms the Lacanian notion of the phallus as the privileged signifier—that which upholds the center of meaning making. The nearly simultaneous emergence of both the dildo in early modern Indian travel
narratives and the fetish in African voyage accounts affirms a historical phenomenon in which erotic materiality surfaces in early modern perceptions of non-Christian spiritual practices.

Yet, the question of geography complicates the semiological advent of “dildo” and “fetish” and their subsequent correlation to Othello. How can the handkerchief, as a handicraft sewn by an Egyptian sibyl, simultaneously function as an Indian altarpiece shaped like a phallus? The geographical separation disrupts the notion that the handkerchief can function as both a fetish and a dildo during the early modern period. It is either or. Or is it? I think the elasticity of the term Moor permits for thinking of geographies as liminal—any foreign or exotic locale beyond the European horizon falls under the sign of the other. As explorers began mapping the New World, terms signifying alterity, like Moor, frequently collapsed multiple groups of people into a single all-encompassing category, based not solely on their geographic origin but also on racial or religious difference. In “Mulattos, Blacks, and Indian Moors: Othello and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference,” Michale Neal reminds us “of the notorious indeterminacy of the term Moor itself” insofar that it could refer to each, some, or all of the following: “the Berber-Arab people,” “the inhabitants of the whole North African littoral,” Africans in general or even “any darker-skinned peoples.”66 If Moor is not precisely a site-specific term, then its nebulousness is open to interpretation. Neal notes,

“Muslims on the Indian subcontinent were habitually called *Moors.*”\(^{67}\) Therefore, if we entertain the possibility that Othello as a Moor could conceivably maintain a partial connection to India, then the handkerchief can function historically, geographically, and theoretically as both a fetish and dildo. After all, is Othello not the one who brought the handkerchief from an exotic, faraway land into the European sphere? Into Venice? Then onto the London stage? The handkerchief, like Othello, could be from any of these places.

By the 17\(^{th}\) Century, the language of dildos had already figured into patriarchal anxieties about female promiscuity. In *The Character of Town Miss*, an anonymous author warns us, “A Miss is a new Name, which the *Civility* of this Age bestows on one, that our *unmannerly* Ancestors call'd, *Whore* and *Strumpet.*”\(^{68}\) In this moralizing cautionary tale, the Town Miss is notorious for seducing men and taking their money. The author warns the men of London:

> The Royal Preacher calls her a *Strange* Woman, but we usually term her a *Common* Woman, and have reason so to do; for sins that were *strange* in *Solomons* days, are *common* in ours. She is a Caterpillar that destroys many a hopeful Young Gentleman in the Blossom, a *Land-Syren*, far more dangerous than they in the Sea: For he that falls into her hands, runs a *three-fold* hazard of Shipwracking *Soul*, *Body*, and *Estate*.

More sexual and seductive than a siren, this beautiful woman is capable of wreaking “downright violence” on patriarchy. With “skin ... clearer than her conscience,” she surreptitiously meets with “a *French Merchant* to supply her with *Dildo’s*” and then goes

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\(^{67}\) Neal, 365.

about the town with her accessories which include a “box of her teeth,” a “Blackmoor” and “a little dog.” In this discourse, the dildo is an import, an object brought into England from another more lascivious country. Like the merchant who supplies the Town Miss with dildos from France, Othello imports the handkerchief from a liminal geography and gives it to Desdemona as an exotic gift.

Already irresistibly evident, we can see the parallels between Desdemona and the Town Miss, both as women coupled with Black Moors and who are characterized as “fair devils” with exteriors whiter than their black devilish interiors. Desdemona's name itself possesses the word “demon,” connecting her to the diabolical language frequently invoked in Othello. When Iago tells Othello that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with the handkerchief, Othello curses Desdemona:

Damn her, lewd minx! Oh, damn her, damn her!  
Come, go with me apart I will withdraw.  
To furnish me with some swift means of death  
For the fair devil. (3.4.492—495)

The transgression is in appearing other than one actually is—the performance of seeming—in the phallic masquerade. For Desdemona, the handkerchief signifies possibilities for pleasure. It allows her to put pressure on prescribed gender norms and enables her to perform masculinity through the fetishized power of the phallus. She is given access to erotic pleasure through the fetishistic act of gender bending, and the handkerchief is her pleasure object. It is her dildo, the paradigm of the erotic prosthesis.

The dildo, as a modern sexual device, gives the woman access to a queer jouissance that does not necessitate the presence of a male body. The dildo is a
detachable penis. It is a *jou jou*, a sex toy. The woman has access to masturbatory *jouissance* whenever she desires. Although the heterosexual woman desires the very phallic organ that she does not possess, she can displace her desire from the penis onto the fetish and can thus abandon her dependency on the male body. This form of female pleasure excludes the male and is explicitly non-reproductive; this is terrifying to patriarchy's investment in reproductive futurity as a tool for social and political regulation. When the female no longer needs the male, then patriarchy has been castrated. The necessity for the sex/gender binary is annulled and the queer bodies, those individuals who experience *jouissance* in non-reproductive, non-heterosexual ways, emerge as legitimated entities no longer confined to the outlawed margins of heteronormative society.

Furthermore, the dildo has another unique effect by means of the “strap-on” method. The female body is no longer the passive and submissive receptacle for the penis. The woman can assume the traditional masculine role in intercourse, and the man can, in turn, invert into the role of the receiver. This may appear to be a feminization of the male body, but it in fact gives the heterosexual male access to forms of sexual pleasure that have long been enjoyed by homosexual and bisexual men but that have been conventionally restricted from heterosexual men (unless they be willing to surrender their investment in the reproductive tendencies to heteronormative intercourse). However, this openness to queer forms of pleasure would probably have a castrating effect in the eyes of the staunch adherents to patriarchy. Such is the case in *Othello*; patriarchy is opposed to the experiences, effects, and potential of female masculinity as exhibited by
Desdemona. Our male cast of characters fears its castration at the hands of the phallically empowered female.

Recall that Lacan refers to the embodiment of the phallus as a “masquerade.” It is a performance, a show. It reminds us that the phallus, even as a “privileged signifier,” is ultimately a cover for a repressed emptiness. It is only through the fetishization of the signifier that the phallus has the effect of meaning. Consequently, this act of fetishization is also a performance of gender; it is the reiteration of particular norms attached to a culturally collective signifier. This logically leads us to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the notion that gender is constructed through stylized practice—or even habits—of signification which produce the effect of “discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions.”

Although compulsory heteronormativity is expected and, well, compelled, it is not determined. While humans are deeply attached to habits of signification that appear to be norms, Butler rejects the idea that there exists a prediscursive aspect of self which produces a gendered identity. Working from Jacques Derrida's theory of iterability, she locates constructions of identity at the level of the sign, constructed through normalizing processes of citation. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler calls for an “unsettling of matter,” exploring and exercising the potentiality of the queer body in order to upset the normalizing discourses of power, which define the contours of the human body and consequently which bodies “matter,” those that meet criteria of intelligibility and humanness (white, male, heterosexual, thin,

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and financially secure). The fact that gender is iterable means that the sex/gender binary is not stable; there is room for variability though the agency of the individual and his or her ability to re-conceptualize normalized processes of signification. Butler contends that “the gendered body acts in part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.” The potential for variation exists in the subject's capacity to interpret and then to enact those interpretations rather than adhere to the repetitions of traditional gendered behaviors.

Desdemona’s use of the dildo, a rhetorical and theatrical performance of masculinity, is an inversion of the power of the phallus, the ultimate symbol of oppressive normalizing forces. Although the woman’s use of the dildo ironically reaffirms the symbolic power of the phallus, its prosthetic attachment to the female body (whether “strapped-on” or penetrative) is indeed an unsettling of the “normal” body. The woman with the dildo parodies masculinity by exposing it as a prosthesis and ultimately a fallacy—an inherently empty signifier which is neither natural nor properly male. Patriarchy fantasizes that the female lack demands to be filled with the phallus and thus inscribes the female body with cultural codes of femininity and passive sexuality. However, the dildo explodes the masculine fantasy by negating the female necessity for the male part and by proving that patriarchy is penetrable—the dildo points straight toward his anus.

Conceputalizing the handkerchief as an enabler, fetishistically stitched with the signifying power of the phallus, Desdemona discovers her capacity to interpret gender

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and inclines herself to perform masculinity. We see this in the boldness of her speech, her rhetorical prowess which rivals that of her male subjects. Recall her curt, passive-aggressive repartee with Iago:

IAGO. She was a wight, if ever such wights were --
DESDEMONA. To do what?
IAGO. To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer.
DESDEMONA. O, most lame and impotent conclusion!

Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband. (2.1.158-163)

In this short dialogue, Desdemona manages to verbally castrate Iago's speech (which is ironic because Iago is often touted to be the master of language in *Othello*), while simultaneously posing the threat of female mimesis as she urges Emilia to take her queue and discount her husband's education.

Desdemona eloquently asserts her presence throughout the first half of the play. She is by no means a silent or weak character. Consider her “divided duty” and the challenge posed to her father in her choice to elope with the “Black Moor.” This is an outright disavowal of the father figure, an attack on patriarchy, and an assertion of female agency that commands attention. She is unafraid to publicly confess her aberrance: “My downright violence and scorn of fortunes / May trumpet to the world” (1.3.250-251). She rhetorically castrates the very system attempting to subdue her by refusing to apologize for her transgression and resisting enslavement to her father's house. Her confession silences the nobles and leaves Brabantio muttering a wimpy complaint and warning to Othello: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (2.3.292-293). The apparatus of power starts to slip as Desdemona asserts her
queerness.

*Female Masculinity*

We must interrogate why female masculinity presents such a major threat to patriarchy in *Othello*. Judith Halberstam tells us in her book *Female Masculinity* that “the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness ... conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege.” 72 The patriarchal system realizes that the female's body cannot be enclosed if she realizes a genuine masculine subjectivity. She will assert herself as equal (or perhaps even as superior) rather than as a commodity for traffic, treasure, and safekeeping. Even though a female may be “better” at performing masculinity than a biological male, the patriarchy frames “female masculinities ... as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing.” 73 Halberstam argues that “authentic” masculinity relies “on the subordination of alternative masculinities.” 74 Desdemona is this figure, the female who can successfully perform masculinity but is ultimately rejected for her inauthenticity in the eyes of patriarchy. She is the “queer subject who exposes the workings of a dominant heterosexual masculinity,” which refuses to share its polar space with anything or anyone that does not adhere to the norms of the sex/gender binary. 75

The threat of female mimesis looms as patriarchy scrambles to plan Desdemona's

73 Halberstam, 935.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid, 937.
submission. She begins to realize a masculine, queer subjectivity as the men in the play take fearful notice. Her desire “[t]hat heaven had made her such a man” echoes not only in her language but also in the characterizations articulated by other characters. Othello calls her “[m]y fair warrior” (1.1.182) and Cassio refers to her as “our great captain's captain” (2.1.74). If Desdemona is the captain of Othello and if Othello is the captain of the Venetian military, then are we to deduce that Desdemona wields power over all? One would think not, that is, until all of the soldiers encircle her and kneel at her feet when she arrives in Cyprus. Cassio welcomes her:

O, behold,
The riches of the ship is come on shore:
You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees!
Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven,
Before, behind thee, and on every hand
Enwheel thee round! (2.1.82-87)

There is something very masculine and almost royal in Desdemona's performance (perhaps as a subtle homage to Queen Elizabeth I on behalf of Shakespeare), confirming a transvestically masculine quality in her performance. Encircled by reverent men, Desdemona resembles the dildo erected upon the altar in Fryer's travel narrative. She embodies the signifier of desire, the phallus itself. However, this scene perpendicularly reflects a moment of female submission in Act IV in which Desdemona kneels before Iago and pleads, “Good friend, go to [Othello], for, by this light of heaven, / I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel: / If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love” (4.2.142-154). This is the critical problem with Desdemona's character: men kneel before her, then she kneels before them. Like the homosexual, as Foucault would say, she exhibits “a kind of
interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisism of the soul.”

For the sake of my argument, I must delineate the boundaries between hermaphrodisism, transvestism, and androgyny. Hermaphrodisism is a biological condition in which an individual possesses both male and female genitalia or portions of both often configured in an abnormal or “queer” way. Transvestism is a fetishistic act in which a subject derives pleasure from dressing in clothes typically worn by the opposite sex. He or she participates in the masquerade of marking oneself as other than what one is “supposed” to be. While Lacan suggests that the masquerade is actually “being,” the transvestite is aware of the deception, or rather the conflict, of his or her gender not “matching” with his or her genitalia. The transvestite makes a conscious decision (however naturally compelled it may be) to defy prescribed gender norms. The androgynous individual is one whose biological sex appears indeterminable because he or she possesses features that belong to both genders or because he or she lacks any determinable gender markers. Desdemona is not androgynous. She is simultaneously yet paradoxically both a hermaphrodite and a transvestite. Her androgyny is invalidated by the fact that her biological sex is determinable. She possesses the accoutrements (i.e. costume, make-up, etc.) that mark her as female. However, she exhibits a sort of psychically and materially constituted hermaphrodisism in that her biological vagina in conjunction with the phallic handkerchief forms a queer, abstracted configuration of both the male and female genitalia. She is also a transvestite, not as a female character inculcated in the real drama of the play, but as a male actor dressed in drag and

76 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43.
performing femininity (and masculinity in this case) on the Shakespearean stage.

**Transvestism**

Transvestism is a fetish. In *Othello*, a male actor dresses as a female character in order to convincingly portray the tragic situation of a disobedient woman. In her essay “Fetish Envy,” Marjorie Garber claims that “the transvestite is the equivalent of Lacan's third term, not 'having' or 'being' the phallus, but 'seeming' or 'appearing.'”77 The male actor playing Desdemona appears to be the veritable embodiment of the women he intends to portray. This was troubling to the opponents of the early modern London theatre. William Prynne writes:

> A Mans putting on of womans apparell, be it to act a Play, is a dishonest, immodest and unseemly thing, which becomes not Christians or religions: it is a thing of ill, not good report, a thing not honest, but vile and filthy in the sight of all men ... Therefore, it must needs be sinfull, as the recited Fathers, and Marginall Texts of Scripture more fully evidence.78

Not only was transvestism an abomination to Christianity, but it was also a devaluation and degradation of masculinity. Women were considered dangerous, lewd, lascivious, gullible, and incapable of exercising self-control; a man emasculated himself by relishing in such effeminacy in the theatre.

Female to male transvestites were similarly scorned. The 1575 repositories of the London Court of Aldermen recount the punishment of Magdalen Gawyn, a *Hic Mulier,* or

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female to male transvestite, who donned men's clothing and went out into the streets. The document reads:

It was ordered and adjudged by this Court that Magdalen Gawyn, a young woman of the age of twenty-one years, for that she, contrary to all honesty of womanhood, appareled herself in man's clothing and went abroad the streets of this city disguised in that sort, shall tomorrow at eight of the clock in the forenoon be set on the pillory in Cheapside there to remain until eleven of the clock, having her hair hanging over her shoulders and appareled in the attire wherewith she is now clothed. And afterwards to be committed to Bridewell.

Her punishment was a public display of humiliation and re-feminization before being committed to Bridewell, London's corrective facility. Magdalen's disruption of the fixity of early modern gender categories proved intolerable to the patriarchal apparatus of juridical power and resulted in an act of discipline intended to re-normalize her deviant body. “[H]er hair hanging over her shoulders” signified a return to femininity and thus initiated the process of assimilating her into her “proper” gender role.

As figures such as Magdalyn Gawyn and Renaissance England’s infamous “Roaring Girl,” Mary Frith, gained public notoriety, transphobic anxiety over cross-dressing dramatically increased. Puritans and social conservatives railed against transvestic practices in various remonstrances, religious sermons, and didactic pamphlets.

The 1620 pamphlet “Hic mulier; or, the Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to Cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our Times, Expressed in a

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79 It is unclear whether she was wearing men's or women's attire at the time of her punishment. However, it is likely that she was attired in women's clothing since her punishment was one of re-feminization.
81 Mary Frith is also famously known as Moll Cutpurse, “Moll” being a common nickname for women during the Renaissance and “Cutpurse” purportedly signifying her reputation as a pickpocket. Like Magdalen Gawyn, Frith is also documented in Bridewell Court Books.
Brief Declamation: *Non omnes possumus omnes.*” condemns female to male transvestism as an abomination against God and as a breach of nature. The pamphlet reads:

Come, then, you Masculine women, for you are my Subject, you that have made Admiration an Ass and fooled him with a deformity never before dreamed of; that have made yourselves stranger things than ever Noah's Ark unloaded or Nile engendered; whom to name, he that named all things might study an Age to give you a right attribute; whose like are not found in any Antiquary's study, in any Seaman's travel, nor in any Painter's cunning. You that are stranger than strangeness itself; whom Wise men wonder at, Boys shout at, and Goblins themselves start at; you that are the gilt dirt which embroiders Playhouses, the painted Statues which adorn Caroches, and the perfumed Carrion that bad men feed on in Brothels: 'tis of you I entreat and of your monstrous deformity.82

By aligning the transvestite with the monstrous, the text does the discursive work of estranging the queer subject while simultaneously valorizing the male/female sex/gender binary. The author of the pamphlet labels transvestism a deformity, an unthinkable pathology which occurs outside of rational discourse. Because it is not documented in history or told in travel narratives or imagined in the artist’s mind, this cross-dressing queerness must be “stranger than strangeness itself.” This rhetorical device, qualifying strangeness in excess of its highest degree, signifies queerness as that which has not been historiographically validated and renders the transvestite body unintelligible. Moreover, the author's invocation of the goblin, an early modern folkloric figure, casts the transvestite as a mere fiction, an imaginary deformation of the normatively constituted human. These preternatural associations participate in the pamphlet's primary imperative of normalizing the socially transgressive *hic mulier.* While the text attempts to locate

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82 “Hic mulier; or, the Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to Cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our Times, Expressed in a Brief Declamation: *Non omnes possumus omnes,*” Georgetown University. Lauinger Lib. 1 October 2008 <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>
queerness in the discursive, material, and symbolic “outside,” it fails to realize that transvestism is merely the deformation and reconfiguration of the patriarchal system’s naturalized gender norms and performances. The hic mulier simply re-appropriates masculine apparel and behaviors onto the female body. Therefore, the deformity arises from the “inside” as a contradiction imbedded in patriarchy itself and forced into exposure by an emergent secularism.

A similar pamphlet titled “Haec Vir; or the Womanish Man: Being an Answer to the Book Entitled Hic Mulier, Expressed in a Brief Dialogue between Haec Vir, the Womanish Man, and Hic Mulier, the Man-Woman” appeared soon after as a response to the previous pamphlet. “Haec Vir” is a dialogue between a Man-Woman and a Womanish Man who decide to abandon their transvestic practices and return to traditional gendered behaviors. At the end of their dialogue, the Haec Vir resolves:

Away then from me these light vanities, the only Ensigns of a weak and soft nature, and come you grave and solid pieces which arm a man with Fortitude and Resolution: you are too rough and stubborn for a woman's wearing. We will here change our attires, as we have changed our minds, and with our attires, our names. I will no more be Haec Vir, but Hic Vir; nor you Hic Mulier, but Haec Mulier.  

The Womanish Man surrenders his cross-dressing tendencies in favor of becoming a Mannish Man, while the Woman-Man discards her masculine apparel and opts to become a Womanish Woman. These didactic pamphlets were intended to curb cross-dressing in early modern England as they simultaneously established a transphobic discourse of

83 “Haec Vir; or the Womanish Man: Being an Answer to the Book Entitled Hic Mulier, Expressed in a Brief Dialogue between Haec Vir, the Womanish Man, and Hic Mulier, the Man-Woman,” Georgetown University. Lauinger Lib. 1 October 2008 <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>
84 Transphobia may seem like an anachronistic discourse but is understood here as prejudice against
religious power which adamantly and forcefully defined the contours of the gendered body. This fixation on properly delineated gender boundaries heightened as a misogynist (and ironically homosexual) monarch ascended the throne in 1603. In her recent book *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society*, Marlene LeGates writes about King James I ordering the clergy to preach against female to male cross-dressing in 1620 as a collective effort to put an end to the *femme forte*, the strong masculine woman.  

In Renaissance France, the transgression of one's proper *sexe* was frequently met with violence. Valerie Traub points out, “Contrary to the experience of English women, Frenchwomen were prosecuted under sodomy statutes.” There exists no documented evidence that early modern English women were violently punished for crimes of sodomy, and, as Traub tells us, “If we look for the inscription of Englishwomen within the confines of the category of sodomy, we will find only absence, hear only silence.”

In “Fiction and Friction,” Stephen Greenblatt opens with a short episode from Montaigne's travels:

In September 1580, as he passed through a small French town on his way to Switzerland and Italy, Montaigne was told an unusual story that he duly recorded in his travel journal. It seems that seven or eight girls from a place called Chaumont-en-Bassigni plotted together “to dress up as male and thus continue their life in the world.” One of them set up as a weaver, “a well-disposed young man who made friends with everybody,” and moved to a village called Montier-en-Der. There the weaver fell in love with a woman, courted her, and married. The couple lived together for four or five months, to the wife's satisfaction, “so they say.” But then, Montaigne reports, the transvestite was recognized by someone from

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transgendered persons. I am reading Desdemona as crossing (trans) gender boundaries.

87 Ibid, 64.
Chaumont; “the matter was brought to justice, and she was condemned to be hanged, which she said she would rather undergo than return to a girl's status; and she was hanged for using illicit devices to supply her defect in sex.”

Greenblatt argues that the transvestite was not prosecuted for “deception but for the use of prohibited sexual devices, devices that enable a woman to take the part of a man.”

The crime is not constituted by the woman's queer desire but rather by her prosthetic supplementation which disrupts codes of proper masculinity and enhances the female body beyond its societally appropriate bounds. In Renaissance France, sodomy was defined by the act of penetration, an exclusively masculine act prohibited from women. The dildo-endowed female, capable of penetration, displaces erotic codes from within a dominant system of masculine intelligibility.

Like these Renaissance women, who were spurned for gendered performances in conflict their biological bodies, Desdemona is similarly castigated for her own theatricality in performing masculinity. Othello violently reasserts his masculine power over hers by striking her and then vociferating:

> O devil, devil!
> If that the earth could teem with woman's tears
> Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile:
> Out of my sight! (4.1.243-246)

Othello feels castrated by Desdemona's supposed deception and the tool for his castration is the very fetish object in which he materializes his repression. Blinded by his paranoia and determined to repossess the phallus, Othello sees no alternative but violence.

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89 Ibid, 67.
In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler offers her assessment of the transvestite living within the heteronormative social sphere. She writes, “the sight of the transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next us on the bus can compel fear, rage, and even violence.”

The theatre allows the audience to conceptualize the transvestite as imaginary as opposed to real, an actor instead of the “authentic” sexual deviant threatening compulsory heterosexual society. In the marked and separated spaces of the theatre, the audience does not fear Desdemona; however, within the real drama of the play, Desdemona is the fearful yet feared transvestite of which Butler writes. Garber adds, “The woman with the codpiece is the onstage simulacrum of the female transvestite.”

The handkerchief functions as Desdemona's codpiece, a marker of masculinity which covers the genitalia and masks what could potentially be under there.

For Desdemona, the handkerchief not only masks the phallic absence but also forms a hermaphroditic genital configuration which obliterates all notions that sex and gender are pure and fixed, male or female. In the introduction to Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture, Fisher invokes the figure of the hermaphrodite in order to demonstrate how gender in early modern England was prosthetic and culturally constructed of signs. He points to Ambroise's Paré's On
Monsters and Marvels as a text which illuminates this assertion. Paré introduces his hermaphroditic subjects as “children who are born with double genitalia” and then advises his fellow “most expert and well-informed physicians and surgeons” on how to “discerne” the proper sexe of these hermaphrodites. Despite their genital indeterminacy, there is a scientific compulsion to categorize these subjects as either male or female. This need to maintain the male/female sex/gender binary speaks to the cultural intolerance of the malformed body exceeding the proper limits of prescribed sex.

Paré first advises inspecting the genitalia—a method premised on ocularity—in order to determine if the hermaphrodite possesses reproductively functioning organs. He suggests seeing if “the female sex organ is of proper dimensions to receive the male rod [penis] and whether the menstrues flow through it” or whether the male rod “can [become] erect, and whether seed issues from it, [all of] which will be done through the confession of the hermaphrodite.” However, what I found most interesting is that we will come to know the truth through “the confession.” The suggestion of a Foucauldian confession implicates the hermaphrodite in a disciplinary model of confession and report.

This model of confession is best seen in the 1697 novel, The Amours of the Marshal de Boufflers, in which a young woman, who refuses to consummate her marriage with her husband, is brought before an all-female assembly of judges under allegations of being a hermaphrodite:

The Marchioness, being moved by my complaints, at last resolved to call

an Assembly of Ladies of her next Relations, and having given an account to them of her Daughters aversion to the Conjugal Bed, and to all Men whatever, she order'd a most magnificent Collation, which was to be the preparative of one of the most famous General Councils that ever was held among Women. At last, after the Doors of the Appartement, where these Ladies were assembled were shut up close, the Defendant was call'd up to appear before her Judges, where she was examin'd concerning the present state of her natural Parts, to see whether she were an Hermaphrodite. The young woman is summoned to answer for not complying with her wifely duty to have intercourse with her husband and is consequently ordered to confess her deviance by lifting up her skirt and revealing what is under there. Luckily for her, “the Generation-box was found without blemish” and “[a]ll [p]arts thereabouts” were “in very good condition.” In the end, it turns out that her refusal to have sexual relations with her husband is the result of a minor misunderstanding. This sensationalist episode affirms Paré's demand for scientific, ocular proof—a visible confession. Seeing is, in fact, believing. Similarly, Othello's need for a visual confession permeates the first half of Act 4. When Iago suggests that Cassio admitted to lying with Desdemona—“With her, on her; what you will” (4.1.34)—Othello fumes, “Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief!” (4.1.36-37) as if the visible materiality of the handkerchief covers a truth of Desdemona's body that is not readily apparent. Yet, when Othello sees Cassio with his handkerchief, “suspicion quickly takes on the irrevocable status of Truth, and female [or hermaphroditic] deception becomes, not a hideous possibility, but a damned certainty.”


95 D.P.E., 263.

96 Valerie Traub, Desire ad Anxiety: Circulations of sexuality in Shakespearean drama (New York: Routledge, 1992) 34.
The Dutch scientist, Ysbrand Van Diemerbroeck, writes in his 1689 medical treatise, *The Anatomy of Human Bodies*, about a French hermaphrodite who had no qualms visually confessing what she possessed between her legs:

Such an hermaphrodite I remember I once saw in France near Anjou about 28 Years of Age; who was bearded about the Mouth like a Man, yet went in womens Apparel, and for a small matter turn'd up her Coats to any one that had the mind to satisfy Curiosity. In this Party, the Clitoris at the upper end of the Privity, was grown out of the Privity about half a Fingers length, and as thick as a Mans Yard, with a Nut, Brindle, and Foreskin, as in Men; only that the Slit of the Nut was not perforated.  

Once again, the confession comes in the act of lifting or removing a cloth covering. The hermaphrodite reveals a genital configuration which includes parts of both the male and female reproductive anatomy. Furthermore, her beard juxtaposed to her women's apparel displays a prosthetic gendered contradiction correlated to an hermaphroditic genital configuration.

During the 17th century, a number of gynecological texts about women's bodies emerged as a regulatory discourse on female sexuality. Traub tells us that this anxiety is rooted in the fear of the woman's “usurpation of male prerogatives” and that this panic “incite[d] writers to record and thus reveal the anxieties of their culture.” Van Diemerbroeck continues his treatise with stories about female “rubbers,” commonly known as tribades, or women who simulate stereotypically masculine movements in intercourse, and about hermaphrodites, who notoriously seduce heterosexual women:

[A] certain Widow woman, who had two Sons living, by her deceased

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Husband, and was married the second time, though Ignorance, to a Hermaphrodite, confessed that the said Hermaphrodite one Night entered her Body four times, so strenuously and naturally did her business, that she never lay with her Husband with more pleasure. Which Reasons and Examples seem'd formerly to me to prove that your female Rubbers and Hermaphrodites lying with other women, eject their Seed out of the Clitoris, as Men out of the Yard.99

The dead husband’s role is not only usurped by the hermaphrodite, but his ability to give his wife sexual pleasure is exceeded by the hermaphrodite, who, in a sense, performs masculinity better than him, an “authentic” man. Moreover, in this particular treatise, tribades and hermaphrodites are believed to issue semen, or “Seed,” from their clitorises—the ultimate usurpation of masculinity—divesting the man of what is thought to be an exclusively masculine reproductive capability. As sensationalist as this claim actually is, it represents cultural tensions about gender and sexuality inscribed onto the body of the hermaphrodite.

In On Grammatology, Derrida proposes a theory of supplementarity in which the supplement is that which adds to but also replaces the original. He writes, “If supplementarity is a necessarily indefinite process, writing is the supplement par excellence since it proposes itself as the supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech already significant.”100 The supplement like the fetish assumes an original lack and is constantly in “indefinite process.” Desire is predicated on an original absence, and so the subject who desires to satisfy the lack continues to return to the fetish over and over. The fetish, as both object and ritual, functions as this constant

99 Van Diemerbroeck, 184.
displacement of desire—temporarily fulfilling yet never fulfilled. Yet, the fetish as a prosthetic supplement to the body “deconstructs the putative unity, integrity, and singularity of the subject, of its gender and its sexual desires, and registers them as always internally different from themselves.”

Desdemona, as the phallically supplemented woman, hybridizes her corporeality with the supplement and, because of it, assumes traditionally masculine behaviors, consequently bursting the text's cultural fantasy that sex and gender are systematically fixed upon binary difference. Traub articulates, “I would go so far as to argue that the enlarged clitoris and the dildo take on the quality of a fetish, a stand-in for lost desire.”

Likewise, the fetish, the dildo, and the enlarged clitoris function as supplements that impugn seemingly fixed contours of the “normal” body. The transvestite is supplemented by her masculine attire. The hermaphrodite by a queerly configured genitality. Desdemona by her handkerchief. Yet all are covering a(n) (always already absent) phallus.

Erotic Death

I suggested earlier that the phallic power sewn into the fabric of the handkerchief is detachable, transportable, and exchangeable. It can fall away at any given moment. In my queered reading of Othello, the most fateful and pivotal moment occurs between two brackets, a mere stage direction: “[She drops her handkerchief],” (3.3.291) the moment in which Desdemona's fate is decided, the instance in which she loses her phallic power and

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102 Ibid.
masculine capabilities. Bartels commiserates, “Desdemona seems to fall apart at the seams and slide into fatal passivity.”\textsuperscript{103} The phallus as fetish is ultimately prosthetic and unintegrated. The handkerchief is propelled into a string of exchanges through the poisonous machinations of Iago, drifting from Desdemona to Emilia to Iago to Cassio and then finally to Bianca. Now handkerchief-less, Desdemona, a woman once capable of “downright violence,” spirals into silence and submission characterized by a “maiden never bold.”

Yet, where is the handkerchief in Act 5? Its absence is one of the most troubling problematics in \textit{Othello}. I wonder if Desdemona's bed sheets “with lust's blood be spotted” (5.1.37) assume the displaced role of the handkerchief. As many scholars have suggested the strawberries sewn into the handkerchief anticipate Desdemona's blood spilt on her wedding sheets\textsuperscript{104}, which can be interpreted in one of three ways: 1) blood from her murder, 2) menstrual blood, or 3) blood from her burst virgin hymen. Either way, the blood confesses the fallacy of the phallus as an ultimately empty signifier. Stained with vaginal blood, the cloth which covers the phallic lack confesses and re-affirms its very absence. Although the fetish conceals the lack, it also calls attention to it. Spotted with murderous blood, the sheets confess the ultimate absence of being—death. Metaphorically speaking, Othello attempts to violently repossess the phallus—the cloth by which he feels castrated—by covering Desdemona's face with it and suffocating her. Her death is the final performance of the fetish, a paraphilic ritual of erotic

\textsuperscript{103} Bartels, 427.
asphyxiation—depriving her brain of oxygen for sexual arousal. Regarding the erotic pleasure of death, Leo Bersani writes in “Is the Rectum a Grave?”:

For there is finally, beyond the fantasies of bodily power and subordination that I have just discussed, a transgressing of that very polarity which, as Georges Bataille has proposed, may be the profound sense of both certain mystical experiences and of human sexuality. In making this suggestion I’m also thinking of Freud’s somewhat reluctant speculation, especially in the Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, that sexual pleasure occurs whenever a certain threshold of intensity is reached, when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow “beyond” those connected with psychic organization. Freud keeps returning to a line of speculation in which the opposition between pleasure and pain becomes irrelevant, in which the sexual emerges as the jouissance of exploded limits, as the ecstatic suffering into which the human organism momentarily plunges when it is “pressed” beyond a certain threshold of endurance.105

For Desdemona, the pleasure of disruption coupled with the pain of discipline constitutes the circumstance through which the erotic erupts. The “jouissance of exploded limits” arises through the shattering of her (gendered) self, not just in her transgression and its consequent discipline, but in the throes of erotic death, the ultimate shattering of the ego.

I do not want to suggest that the queer woman merely collapses into tragedy and that patriarchy ultimately triumphs. I agree with Stallybrass's conjecture that “the subversive intervention of Emilia suggests a third possibility: the rejection of enclosure and the validation of the female grotesque.”106 Desdemona's legacy lives on briefly in Emilia. She emerges from Iago's shadow and refuses to be silenced, “I will speak as liberal as the north” (5.2.218). She unravels the truth and exposes her husband's gross deceit. In this moment of urgency, Emilia, as a maid probably all too familiar with

106 Stallybrass, 147.
cleaning rags, cloths, bed sheets, and handkerchiefs, subverts the enclosed body. The signifier is found within the individual's agency to perform it, and Emilia does just that. In the play's finale, the queer is resurrected and peels away the layers of artifice ultimately uncovering the “truth.” The queer exposes the interpretable, liminal space between the signifier and the signified; it treads the edge of collapse into language but somehow manages to uphold the delicate balance of meaning making. Trying to make meaning out of signs for Emilia, Desdemona, early modern women, and ultimately ourselves, we as subjects—meaning makers—depend on our handkerchiefs, these “trifles as light as air” (3.3.325).
III.

Coda

“Alas, he is betrayed and I undone!”
-Desdemona (5.2.80)

At the end of Othello, Desdemona is ruined, in the sense of being undone by psychic and corporeal violence. Yet, she is also a material ruin, an embodied memory buried in a pile of Benjminian “wreckage upon wreckage” accruing toward the sun. The modern queer subject, like the early modern queer woman, is one who must always anticipate her own ruin. Returning to Freccero's rhetorical use of prolepsis, this is one such way in which the Renaissance proleptically anticipates queer modernity: premodern ruin prophesies our own. The constant and consistent repetition of violence against queers across the epochs assures us of this inevitable fate. Desdemona's still body lain across the stage during the final act promises that violence will be restored, re-fleshed and re-enacted the next time the play is re-staged. Like Hubert Robert's 1796 painting Vue Imaginaire de la Grande Galerie en Ruines (A View of the Grand Gallery in Ruins), which anticipates the ruin of the Grand Gallery in the Louvre before it actually happens,
we have an uncanny sense that this future vision of ruin will eventually come to fruition; we just don't know exactly when. However, we can be certain that our queer bodies will become undone. We will collapse into ruins.

This becoming ruin is very much a Deleuze-Guattarian becoming in that “the self [becoming ruin] is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.”¹⁰⁷ In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari position the notion of becoming as the multiple ways in which the body can participate, shift, and transform itself within a vast array of networks of interactions in the world. Becoming does not produce identity, or even non-identity, but rather an assemblage of contingencies experienced as collisions, bounces, meltings, ricochets, and even disconnects among and between various forces. Deleuze and Guattari suggest:

> There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort in the object, or 'return' in the subject. A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions ... An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections.¹⁰⁸

In becoming a ruin, the queer body simultaneously becomes an assemblage of human, ruin, monument, carcass, and even possible resurrection. In “Pink Vectors of Deleuze: Queer Theory and Inhumanism,” Jeffrey Cohen and Todd Ramlow, reflecting on Deleuze's suicide, wonder if death is also a becoming.¹⁰⁹ Jashir Puar answers this question in her discussion of the female suicide bomber in the conclusion to her book

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¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 8.
“The dynamite strapped onto the body ... the body-weapon ... the radiation of heat, the stench of burning flesh, the impact of metal upon structures and the ground, the splatter of blood, body parts, skin” comprise “the becomings of a suicide bomber.” So yes, death is a becoming. It is a becoming ruin, becoming ghost, becoming death, self, and other in a moment which dislocates time, destabilizes matter, and reorients space.

So what becomes of our dear Desdemona? She becomes man, woman, handkerchief, stage prop, dildo, the pillow over her face, the actor in costume, the yellowed pages of a rotting book, piles and piles of historical ruinous rubble. However, in death, she becomes still, silenced, and voiceless. (Deleuze and Guattari never account for becoming nothing ...) Yet, from this nothingness arises a queer demand for history, or as Freccero says “a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present in the form of an ethical imperative.” So let us attend to our present ruins before we become ruins ourselves.