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## Designing Goddesses: Shakespeare's *Othello* and Marian Nowiński's *Otello Desdemona*

**Abstract:** The article discusses the intertextual relationship between the poster by Marian Nowiński, *Otello Desdemona*, and the content of Shakespeare's play, while presenting the most important elements of the plot that are decisive for the portrayal of Desdemona. It also discusses the tradition of female nudes in Western art. This allows to usher out these characteristic features of elements of Desdemona that fashion her into Venus Caelestis and Venus Naturalis. The article focuses on the ambivalence of Nowiński's poster and discusses the significance of the paintings by Titian, Giorgione, and Fuseli in designing the figure of Desdemona as a goddess.

**Keywords:** Desdemona, William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Marian Nowiński, Shakespeare in visual arts.

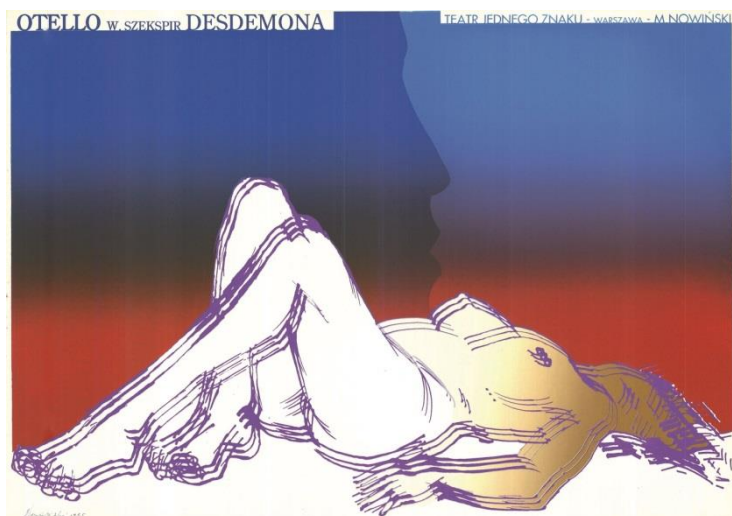


Figure 1. *Otello Desdemona* (1995), Marian Nowiński  
Courtesy of Dydo Galeria Plakatu, <http://www.dydopostergallery.com/>

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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! (*Othello*, 2.1.84-87)<sup>1</sup>

Like the figure of Venus in Botticelli's masterpieces, the white, beautiful and sexually attractive figure of Desdemona emerges on the Cyprus coast in the second act of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The audience soon learns that this young woman is to be devoutly admired by her newlywed husband as well as by the officers in his command. Shakespeare designs Desdemona as if she were an embodiment of both the innocent love, *Venus Caelestis* and passionate love, *Venus Naturalis*: how her character is described in the first Act makes one share Othello's initial conviction that his wife is truly of divine nature. This conviction seems to be echoed in Marian Nowiński's 1995 poster *Otello Desdemona* [Figure 1] which features a female figure in a pose traditionally associated with the sleeping Venus. This paper offers an interpretation of the poster that links the iconographic analysis of Nowiński's work with the presentation of Desdemona as a goddess in Shakespeare's play.

An iconographic interpretation of a literary work generates significant consequences for its critical reception. Consequently, a literally-inspired work of art may be read as an example of artistic criticism regarding the text it refers to, independently of the designer's intentions. If we think of a poster as a cultural text that undertakes the task of interpretation, it will mean that we can treat it intertextually: an argument that might be traced to Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* (1977) and extended to the functioning of a work of art in its relationship with the viewer:

a text [an image] consists of multiple writings [traces], issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author [designer], as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader [viewer]: the reader [viewer] is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing [an image] consists of; the unity of a text [an image] is not in its origin, it is in its destination. (148)

Thus, a visual work of art offers an interpretation that is to be decoded by the poster viewers. A close study of an image reveals how it enters into a dialogue with a text, reacts to it and, finally, provokes or enhances various critical interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from William Shakespeare. *Othello*. Ed. E. A. J. Honigmann. London: Arden Shakespeare, 1996.

When discussing a poster as a text to be decoded, it is important to remember that it has a specific informative function to fulfil. The interpretation of a poster will be different when the viewers lose their chance to encounter the image in the street, once the poster is moved to art galleries or private collections. Such a change of the immediate spatial context means that the poster loses its advertising character, as there is no theatre performance to announce or to comment on any more.<sup>2</sup> A cultural artefact like a theatre poster constitutes a reciprocal/mutual relationship between the signifiers: visual and textual artworks. Marian Nowiński's *Otello Desdemona* was initially designed as Teatr Jednego Znaku (Theatre of a Single Sign) in Warsaw in 1995.<sup>3</sup> In usual circumstances, when the poster was removed from its original context, the intertextual web of references and allusions moved to the foreground: in the case of Nowiński's work it was the close connection between the image and the dramatic text that might have inspired it. Obviously, a literary work such as Shakespeare's drama is trapped in a web of historical, artistic, and cultural relationships. The poster only extends it further into the fields of the visual and the literary. As a result, these various interpretive resources help to construct and possibly reshape the critical interpretation of Shakespeare's drama.

Just like the paintings studied by Stuart Sillars in his *Painting Shakespeare. The Artist as Critic 1720-1820*, the poster becomes "an image that narrates the play's pivotal moment of action and mediates its larger movement of language and morality to offer a consistent and suggestive critical reading".<sup>(5)</sup> Thus, Nowiński's work constitutes a critical comment on *Othello* which potentially reshapes the readerly approach to Desdemona and her relationship with her husband.

The artistic convention of representing Venus asleep, employed in the poster to introduce the tragedy of Desdemona, generates a number of visual, cultural, historical and literary contexts. Through the added layer of iconographic references, the poster establishes an elaborate network of relationships impregnated with meanings.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, all allusions and visual quotations produce

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<sup>2</sup> This concerns especially theatrical performances which were neither recorded nor studied critically. The poster is said to be "a signal out in the street, informing of what is going to happen inside, in the theatre. It is a promise. In a way it is also an advertisement, but it is rather disinterested". (Kurpik 35) However, if we do not know what has really happened on the stage, the poster loses this particular feature only to acquire new ones.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of a poster taking place of a theater performance is especially significant in this case. Teatr Jednego Znaku (Theatre of a Single Sign) was Nowiński's invention where an entire performance was embraced by a single image.

<sup>4</sup> The article does not aim at establishing what visual inspirations might have governed Marian Nowiński's imagination, which is impossible to fathom on the basis of the visual analysis. However, I contend that when the poster is appreciated as an

a substantial input utilised to produce a visual comment or a critical interpretation of Othello's wife and her fate. To generate such connotations, however, the viewers should be acquainted with the visual and textual resources at least to a certain extent. The paintings discussed in this paper are described with reference to their cultural and historical contexts; the focus then moves to their iconographic analysis which establishes the existence of strong visual traditions replicated in other images depicting female figures. In this manner, the analysis of visual and literary references will allow for the emergence of additional attributes that might be associated with Shakespeare's characters, Desdemona and Othello as introduced through Nowiński's poster.

### Marian Nowiński's *Otello Desdemona*

The composition of the poster refers to the Renaissance convention of sleeping Venuses observed by Cupid and that of resting beauties surprised by male predators. A trained eye acknowledges in Desdemona's positioning the sleeping Venus by Giorgione and the provocative goddess of Urbino by Titian. Yet, the composition of Nowiński's work echoes also the design of the eighteenth-century painter, Henry Fuseli. In *The Nightmare*, the latter depicts a woman suffering from the eponymous dream and being observed by a demon in a male form and a horse.<sup>5</sup> This motif reappears in various nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings by male artists:

[What] these representations of sleeping women [by Lovis Corinth, Amedeo Modigliani, Balthus Lucien Freud as well as Marian Nowiński] have in common [is the] male perspective; the male artist projects his view of the world and his priorities onto an image in which woman is an integral part, but by necessity a passive part, not actively collaborating. The fact is that woman is observed in a state over which the male artist [observer] has full control. However different in style, these works continue the traditional perspective of art since antiquity and the Renaissance. (Kultermann 149-50)<sup>6</sup>

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independent work of art, it guides its recipients towards whatever they are able to identify and justify as their frame of reference in building its interpretation as an artwork.

<sup>5</sup> The selection of paintings is determined by the origin of the sleeping Venus pose in the Renaissance period, in the paintings by Giorgione and Titian, and its further transformations in the eighteenth century. Fuseli's painting seems to reflect the fatal atmosphere of the final scenes of the play. This choice, however, is governed by the individual frame of reference of the viewer and the familiarity with Western iconography.

<sup>6</sup> The second half of the twentieth century brings an appreciation for female artists' work, which causes a significant change in the perception of the sleeping woman as an

Such a spectrum of iconographic references presents the viewer with a complex set of visual cues that together build an image of Nowiński's Desdemona, whose figure acquires additional features through such intertextual readings and might be analysed as a personification or re-interpretation of all the aforementioned characters.

An awareness of iconographic references provides an additional layer to what can be described as a purely aesthetic pleasure derived from experiencing the poster, as well as a recognition of the primary intertextual reference, i.e. the text of the play, enriched by what can be deduced about *Othello* owing to the arrangement of the poster elements, the employment of the colours and the shapes.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the first step to decoding the poster is the interpretation of its design. Even a cursory glance reveals that the poster relies on creating a strong sexual overtone. A blurred triple line forming a female body seems to indicate a vibrating motion which accompanies the climax of a sexual experience. The blurry form and the tensed arrangement of legs, hands, head and closed eyes all suggest either masturbation or an erotic dream. At the same time, the background is dominated by a great shadow of a male profile suspended directly over the beasts of the female figure in the centre of the picture.

Approaching the female body from the left-hand side, the male face looms over the foreground, establishing an ominous, uncomfortable atmosphere. The shadow signals the overpowering presence of an intruder, encroaching brutally into the vulnerable intimacy of the sleeping, exposed woman. It is as if the face intended to capture and take control over the whole picture; this is a reading that can be introduced and explained in the light of *Othello*'s text. Othello is a mighty, omnipresent warrior, but also a "shadowy", weak figure that is positioned against the sensuous Desdemona going through her sexual awakening. The striking difference between the male face hidden within the blueish darkness and the uncovered white female body creates a sense of threat, or even of unavoidable violence.

The atmosphere of sexual tension and imminent danger is enhanced by the choice of colours. Dividing the image into two horizontal spheres, the meeting point between red and blue works to juxtapose the male cooling space

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art motif: "[s]leep, as a prehistory, here again has qualities connected with healing, social therapeutics, [fertility] and ritual. [...]; the possibility that the function of sleep can lead to a new status of reality is reestablished." (Kultermann 151-52)

<sup>7</sup> The recipients of the poster do not have to possess specialised competence to enjoy it. Cf. Aristotle's statement,

Thus, the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause. (36)

of Othello against the red-hot one belonging to Desdemona. However, one zone is penetrated by the other. The fragile balance between the spheres is upset by the intrusion of the blue profile line into the red space. The brownish hues of Desdemona's upper body suggest burned skin or bruises—probable signs of violence. Another colour adds to the overall feel, as Desdemona's body is stretched along a white surface, possibly signifying the bed covered with white wedding-sheets. The exposition of innocent whiteness under the sexually stimulated body bathed in red invites a highly ambivalent appreciation of the female. The design of the poster reveals Desdemona as defined by both the purity of the white and the eroticism invoked by the use of the red and seems to suggest Othello's dual perspective in this respect: the fact that "she is a satisfactory sexual partner" becomes more or less obvious for other characters, first of all Iago, and it is duly noted. "Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor. [...] As with so many of Iago's remarks, this contains an important truth". (Hallstead 115)

In Nowiński's poster Othello's dark silhouette overshadows Desdemona's body, looming over her and threatening to quench her libidinous, sexually-awoken self. The poster designer uses the visual language of eroticism, which seems to be appropriate for Shakespeare's play, as "sex is central to the plot of *Othello*". (Thompson 44) Initially, the newly married couple is able to employ sexual language and enjoys their new marital status. Although definitely appreciating his wife's inexperience, Othello "explicitly invites his wife to bed in language that blends scriptural and physical allusiveness: 'come, my dear love, / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensure; / The profit's yet to come 'twixt me and you.' (II. 3. 8)". (Kirsch 730) Othello and his wife are forthright regarding their intimate intentions, and speak openly about their sexual desire:

DESDEMONA	The heavens forbid	
	But that our loves and comforts should increase,	
	Even as our days do grow!	
OTHELLO	Amen to that, sweet powers!	
	I cannot speak enough of this content,	
	It stops me here; it is too much of joy.	
	And this, and this, the greatest discords be	<i>They kiss.</i>
	That e'er our hearts shall make. (2.1.190-197)	

Still, the early modern culture placed women within rigid social frames, both before and after marriage. Expected to accept an assigned spouse, young wives, married to establish social and financial protection for themselves and their families, were to give birth to male successors, be honourable, are not to dishonour their partners with passionate love. By choosing her husband on her own, Desdemona not only rebels against her father's will but also violates the

social conventions of the time. The innocence of a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl, which Othello expects from his wife, is supposed to be maintained after the marriage as well. However, when persuaded by Iago to recognise Desdemona's social independence and sexual appetite in terms of sin and corruption, Othello seems to be surprised, frightened and disgusted at the signs of her free will. When Desdemona starts to exercise her power over him, he retreats. The darkness embodied by Iago transforms their love into a curious combination of fear and desire, at least in Othello's mind. Othello's attitude changes and Desdemona's passion becomes not only unwelcome, but is also considered as something monstrous, stereotypically associated with blackness: "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face." (3.3.389-91) (Kirsch 734) Consequently, she loses her divine charm in his eyes and is condemned by her husband as a whore. Throughout the play Desdemona is considered as a divine creature but is also spoken of in highly sexual terms: "Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms, / Give renew'd fire to our extincted spirits, / And bring all Cyprus comfort! (II.i.77)". The assumption of her sexual self, achieved through her elopement and marriage without her father's consent, in the eyes of the male characters "destroys her divine nature imposed on her by Othello and puts her among the whores of Venice". (Hallstead 119)

An analysis of the play and the close study of the poster's composition and the applied colours, provide the poster viewers with a preliminary reflection on Shakespeare's text. However, the history of Western art allows for a further, in-depth analysis revealing other significant issues regarding *Othello*'s dramatic characters and their actions. The iconographic references evoked by Nowiński's work point at various female figures known from literature and mythology. The Western European tradition depicting a female nude in a sleeping or resting pose is preserved in numerous artworks and constitutes either an element of their composition as, for instance, in Titian's *Bacchanalia* (1523-24), where a girl is presented as a variation on the motif of Venus in the sleeping woman in the bottom right-hand foreground; (Wundram 66) or as a central trope, like in the paintings of the sleeping Venus, the provocative Venus of Urbino or the woman tormented by nightmares from Fuseli's painting.

### **"Hail to Thee, Lady": Renaissance Goddesses**

Renaissance social conventions not only refused the female voice but also removed passion from the marital union. On the one hand, the sexual vacuum left in marriage is filled in by prostitutes and mistresses, sometimes officially delegated by their own families to secure their social status, or provided by wealthy and influential protectors. (Hagen and Hagen 244) On the other hand,

there are the nudes, usually indented to enrich private art collections contemplated behind the closed doors also as wedding portraits which often were hidden behind thick curtains from the unwelcome gaze of intruders. (Ziemia 161) Until the nineteenth century, creating, purchasing and displaying such paintings was tolerated by public opinion, but only under the condition that they presented mythological or biblical themes. (Arassel, *Detal. Historia Malarstwa w Zbliżeniu* 97) Accordingly, the portraits of prostitutes, mistresses or models exposing their private parts in highly erotic poses were accepted and appreciated by the male members of the society, but only when the women were introduced as Eves or Venuses. Consequently, the continuous demand for the nudes supported the establishment of such art conventions as that of sleeping Venus. (Arassel, *Nie Widać Nic. Opowiadanie Obrazów* 97)

One of the most famous painted Venuses is undoubtedly *Venus of Urbino* by Titian. The main figure is difficult to interpret, primarily due to the absence of Cupid. The goddess can, however, be identified by her other attributes such as the roses which she holds in her right hand. (Ronnberg 162) Venus is depicted with these flowers also when she emerges from the sea in Botticelli's painting. However, it is worth remembering that roses, usually associated with passion, desire, earthly pleasures and romance, (Dennis-Bryan et al. 126) function also as a Christian symbol of conjugal fidelity. (Kobielus 188) All in all, the painting sends a potent message about the value of marriage: Titian augments the reference to marital life not only through his choice of a highly domestic setting as a whole but also by adding such meaningful objects as white bedsheets and the underneath fabric spotted with *drops* of red roses<sup>8</sup>; "a port of myrtle on the window ledge to indicate constancy;". (Hagen and Hagen 247) the two chests which "may allude to cassone or marriage chest for clothes of the bride", (Kennedy 48) a lapdog (a crucial element of another painting associated with marriage, *The Arnolfini Marriage* by Jan van Eyck, 1434) standing for faithfulness and devotion but, at the same time, for carnal desire. Because of these details, it seems that this painting suggests a different approach to the traditional divide between saintly wives and sinful whores, whereby desire is possible in marriage. (Hagen and Hagen 247) The painting might be considered as revolutionary, as Venus is designed not only as a goddess but also as a young girl: "the goddess is transformed: a young woman meets the spectator's gaze, conscious of her appeal revealing her body and expecting,

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<sup>8</sup> The wedding bedsheets, white but stained with virgin blood, constitute a symbolic element in Shakespeare's *Othello*, conveying a sense of purity when kept in private, and of sexual provocation when displayed in public: "In her innocence, Desdemona believes that the sheets reveal her steadfastness, love and purity. [...] But the play reveals how easily private and personal objects can be endowed with pornographic meaning when trafficked in public discourse." (Thompson 51-53)



if not caresses, then admiration, [Titian not only introduces sensual love into marriage but also] liberat[es] the nude from the constraints of the mythical stereotypes, seeing a real woman in the female figure," (Hagen and Hagen 247) linking the divine with the mortal.

When Guidobaldo, the son of the Duke of Urbino, purchased the painting of *Venus of Urbino*, he did so either to embellish his private collection<sup>9</sup> or to decorate the bedroom to honour his marriage. His fourteen-year-old wife might have required some pointers on how to behave in bed to titillate her spouse: it seems that the self-stimulation, just like the one performed by Titian's Venus, was justified at the time, because female masturbation was advised by doctors, as in the sixteenth century women were believed to conceive just at the moment of the climax, and therefore were supposed to be adequately prepared for the intercourse, to avoid sinful carnality as much as possible. (Arassel, *Nie Widać Nic. Opowiadanie Obrazów* 99) Thus, Venus's pose might be seen as immoral and provocative, though it seems to be appropriate for a young wife, obedient to her husband and willing to conceive. Titian's painting suggests a seductive atmosphere reinforced with at least two arrangements: the curtain and the positioning of the body. The idea of the curtain in Western art is to convey ambiguity. Thus, it indicates that something should be concealed, either because the view to-be-hidden is shameful, or because its shameless: erotic art that is intended only for a selected group of connoisseurs. (Ziembra 161, 167)<sup>10</sup> Here, the provocative body arrangement of the painting's main subject enhances the ambiguous role of the curtain. Venus's "expression and self-stimulation are an open statement of friendly sexual invitation [though quite] innocent of any of the voyeurism". (Kennedy 50) As Kennedy adds, however, "[i]t is more probably a generalised invitation to connubial sex and the procreation of beautiful children, which it was believed the contemplation of beauty could influence". (50) Explored by prominent artists such as Giorgione, Titian, and, in the contemporary mode, by Nowiński, the traditional nude composition approaches the idea of sleep in an ambiguous manner, especially in modern art. Legs apart, a hand resting on the intimate body parts, face expressing erotic

<sup>9</sup> Guidobaldo was well acquainted with Titian's works included in his father's collection: it is especially *La Bella* that made a great impression of him. Although he did not have enough financial means, he acquired a portrait of the same model but without clothes and called it the *Naked woman*. (Hagen and Hagen 243)

<sup>10</sup> The idea of covering and uncovering is deeply rooted in the European way of thinking as an indication of something spiritual, divine and saint-like. (Ziembra 158) According to Honigmann, this saint-like creature in the drama is Desdemona: "Welcoming the 'divine Desdemona' to Cyprus, Cassio kneels and salutes her, 'Hail to thee, lady, and the grace of heaven ... Enwheel thee round!' (2.1.85-7). This, I have said, comes close to being a 'Hail Mary', and her identification with heaven continues to the end of the play". (Honigmann 107)

passion, the elongated body, all indicate the state of climax rather than peaceful rest. However, the Western European modern culture deprives the naked beauty of her independence: the exposition of pubic hair is recognised by John Berger as a signifier of female power over the male society. In the Western European art tradition, the nude usually lacks such pubescence markers. (Berger 55) The goddess is painted to be observed; she ultimately loses her agency and becomes an object of male pleasure. (Berger 46)

Following in the footsteps of Titian, Nowiński's poster allows Desdemona to be both a wife and a lover; *Venus Caelestis* and *Venus Naturalis*. The sleeping Venus composition of Nowiński's poster might find its justification in Shakespeare's drama, albeit indirectly. For instance, it is surprising that the goddess of love is not mentioned in the play, even though one of its settings is Cyprus. Shakespeare "must have known [...] that according to legend Aphrodite (or Venus) rose from the sea near Paphos, on the west coast of Cyprus. Poets celebrated Cyprus as the island of Venus". (Honigmann 11) Moreover, both Venus, as in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, and Shakespeare's Desdemona (2.1.85-87), are welcomed there as divine creatures, but for the latter this is not the end of her journey.

Desdemona's living space is dynamic, as it is gradually being narrowed down from the very beginning of the play: she moves from Venice to Cyprus, where she is confined to her new house, later to the bedchamber and finally to her bed. The bed constitutes an essential element weighing on the depiction of both Titian's goddess and Othello's wife. The bedchamber smothering "scene is dominated in many productions by a curtained four-poster, a thing of pomp and circumstance that becomes something like a cage from which Desdemona cannot escape (like her marriage)". (Honigmann 86) Analogous to the immature, but exceedingly beautiful Venus,<sup>11</sup> depicted on a similar partly curtained bed, Shakespeare's innocent but passionate Desdemona awaits her beloved to consummate their marriage and conceive his heir.

As it was already mentioned, Desdemona leaves Venice, the city of dubious nature but still "a true *police*, a civilizing and ordered place where calm and rational interventions of ducal authority are an effective check against the storms of" a young woman's rebellion. (Neill 117) The transfer to a new location is marked by a cleansing storm that, on the one hand, destroys Turkish ships and washes away all Venetian remains of Desdemona's defiance on the other. Thus, she moves to Cyprus, the island associated with love and erotic atmosphere, "where the goddess [Venus] renewed her virginity after her adulterous liaison with Mars" which in fact is a home for "the shut-in society of

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<sup>11</sup> In the painting, young age and beauty are highlighted, for instance, by such details as breasts, which "were considered beautiful only if small, round and firm, lacking the fullness of maturity." (Hagen and Hagen 245)

a garrison town, the sort of place that feeds on rumour and festers with suspicion". (Neill 117) Consecutive locations reflect the development of the play, whereby Desdemona gets transformed from a young, rebellious, brave newly-wed into an attractive alluring wife and, finally, into a woman who becomes passive and defenceless against the military and masculine world, as if losing faith in her power over the male characters appearing in her presence.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, her transformation is the outcome of her being treated as an object: of Roderigo's and Cassio's admiration, of Iago's obsession, of Othello's passion: "Desdemona is to her husband—an object whose capacity to arouse wonder in the beholder is seen to underwrite the beholder's selfhood." (Yachnin 201) Once on the island, she is deprived of any guidance or support: "a stranger to [the corrupt social order of Cyprus]; cut off from her family, effectually removed from those 'Of her own clime, complexion and degree', a woman almost alone in a conspicuously masculine realm." (Neill 118) In the end, she is a naked and exposed body, becoming only marginally conscious of the male world governed by defamation and slander.

Nowiński's Desdemona takes on the features characterising Titian's goddess and her mythical predecessors. The poster-Desdemona might be regarded as the love goddess of exceptional beauty, the patroness of desire, sex, fertility and prosperity. These associations support the image of Desdemona as a young woman who is aware of different shades of passion by combining at least two of them: "Sensuality and affection are inseparable in Desdemona's consciousness [...] she wants to consummate the marriage, she is subdued to Othello's [...] 'utmost pleasure' [...] At the same time, she consecrates her soul to his honour and valiancy, and says that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind.'" (Kirsch 724) In contrast to Titian's Venus, Nowiński allows his female figure to close her eyes and dream. Thus, the poster evokes not only the associations with Titian's *Venus of Urbino* but also her predecessor i.e. *Sleeping Venus* by Giorgione, Titian's older colleague from Bellini's workshop (after his death, Titian is said to be the one who finished *Sleeping Venus*).

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<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, like Titian's Venus, Desdemona is accompanied by her maid, Emilia. Their interactions reveal the tension and frustration caused and constantly enhanced by the masculine environment around them. The women defend themselves against the male world with a "frank, generous and nurturing" feminine friendship seen as "[t]he counter-universe of women [which] provides us with an alternative reality," (McKwin 129) based on truth, loyalty and sacrifice. For a more elaborate discussion regarding the characterisation of Desdemona see: Carol Thomas Neely's *Woman and Men in Othello* (Neely 133-58), Shirley N. Garner's *Shakespeare's Desdemona* (Garner 233-52), Joan Ozark Holmer's *Desdemona, Woman Warrior: "O, these men, these men!"* (4.3.59) (Holmer 132-64) and Lisa Hopkins's *Love and War on Venus' Island: Othello and The Lover's Melancholy* (Hopkins 51-63). Hopkins's article also includes references to parallels between Desdemona and Venus.

The goddess depicted in this painting gives an impression of someone who dreams of love and self-pleases herself in the act. Still, even in this erotic gesture, she remains innocent. Although it is impossible to regard her as an allegory of sexual intercourse, this Venus might embody the very recollection of it. Giorgione's goddess is designed as an image lost in reverie, pure and un-provoking: the features which echo the presentation of Shakespeare's Desdemona and emerge through Nowiński's design as well.

### **Desdemona's *Nightmare***

*The Nightmare* painted by Henry Fuseli in 1781 and exhibited one year later, led to increased interest in the artist and bestowed upon him the status of "an icon of irrational eroticism". (Myrone 6) The painter introduces in the painting a limited number of objects: a red-curtained bed, a footrest and a simple dressing table, a closed book, a barely visible mirror, an empty black bottle and a covered box. These items constitute a dark background for three figures: a black horse, a brownish creature and the female in the foreground. Clad in a white nightgown, and resting on white sheets, partly obscured by a red blanket and a yellow shawl, the woman becomes not only the brightest element of the composition, but she also divides it horizontally in two parts representative of two divergent realities. The lower part of the painting is the space where the resting woman's body is surrounded by ordinary objects, usually found in a female bedchamber. Her closed eyes and right hand hidden behind her head indicate sleep. However, her lips are slightly apart, cheeks rosy, the upper body is falling, with the left hand almost touching the floor—all of these elements indicate a drowsy, possibly erotic, but also death-like state.

Most importantly, the upper part of the picture is dominated by a dark, small creature sitting on the woman's chest. It is half-turned towards the viewers and casts a demonic, horned shadow onto the red curtain behind it. The lecherous demon<sup>13</sup> is possibly an inspiration from Germanic legends, where evil spirits visit women in their sleep to have sex with them. However, here, the creature is not involved in any actual wrongdoing, but its intense gaze is a harbinger of some horrid fate: the viewer and the demon both look at the body,

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<sup>13</sup> The very word *incubus* holds an erotic meaning and might be translated from Latin as: a demon that 'lies/sleeps upon' the dreamer. [...] The first meaning of 'incubus' was simply 'nightmare' and it may have been a straightforward attempt to translate the Greek *ephjaltes*. In rendering the idea of 'jumping upon' into Latin, however, the translators enmeshed it in a matrix of words that contained clear sexual connotations—for example *concumbere*, to sleep (with) and *concubinus*, concubine. (Stewart 286)

and both become complicit in the act of visual violence. The creature is accompanied by a black horse, whose head emerges from behind the red curtain.<sup>14</sup> The animal has pointed ears, a raised mane and white, blind-like bulging eyes directed towards the woman. Its blind excitement, the undisturbed patience and glee of the demonic creature, and the almost complete darkness engulfing the silhouette of the sleeping girl, make the scene ambiguous and disturbing.

The dark atmosphere is enhanced by the eroticism of the woman's pose. From the very beginning of his artistic career, Fuseli manifested a considerable interest in such an atmosphere which he found in Shakespeare's works. The artist's "visions of the supernatural, the uncanny made knowable, achieved wide-spread popularity: while the most extreme of this is the various versions of *The Nightmare*, many of his Shakespeare paintings adopt similarly sensational vocabularies to convey readings of the plays". (Sillars 220)<sup>15</sup> The sense of threat dominating the image can be traced back to Fuseli's own life and the story of his rejected love for Anna Landolt. His hurt feelings were transformed into a rape fantasy of obsession and possession, as he admitted in a letter to a friend:

Last night I had her in bed with me—tossed my bedclothes huger-mugger—wound my hot and tight-clasped hands about her—fused her body and her soul together with my own—poured into her my spirit, breath and strength. Anyone who touches her now commits adultery and incest! She is mine, and I am hers. And have her I will. (Ward 23)

The demonic incubus sitting on the chest of a girl that goes through an erotic nightmare can be read as a visual marker of the male desire to control female sexuality. The compositional arrangement applied by Nowiński places his Shakespearean poster and its central character within the referential frames of

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<sup>14</sup> The prevailing criticism of the painting discusses it as an internalized struggle: "A hairy demon perches atop a voluptuous woman laid out asleep on her bed as a wall-eyed horse pokes its head through the velvet drapes in the background." (Stewart 282) "The sleeper does not see either the incubus or the horse, although as a scene of a nightmare they are part of her thoughts." (Mishra 295)

<sup>15</sup> Sillars finds in the painting numerous traces of visual references to another Fuseli's painting directly devoted to Shakespeare's verbal imaginary. In his *Cobweb* (1785-86), we might recognize Mab, mentioned by Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*: "This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs, / That presses them and learns them first to bear" (1. 4. 92-3). Another literary equivalent of Fuseli's incubus is Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "since it is he who places the ass-head on Bottom's shoulders, it is he who is responsible for the dream, or 'Nightmare' Bottom undergoes, and Puck's presence as the 'Nightmare' incubus is a logical extension in visual form of the text's implications". (Sillars 253)

*The Nightmare*.<sup>16</sup> Though Fuseli's painting is deprived of any direct associations with *Othello*, it generates the gloomy mood omnipresent in the final bedchamber scene and provides a commentary on the male gaze that objectifies Desdemona in the play. The painting indirectly introduces the dramatic surroundings narrowed to the very space of Desdemona's bed. It constitutes the place of fatal tragedy, which gives the impression of something between sexual violence and orgasmic excitement. At this moment of the drama, still barely conscious of male desires and accusations, Desdemona seems to be constantly accompanied by the cunning figure of the devilish Iago, who, just like Fuseli's incubus, leads the ghostly image of Othello to look at Desdemona from his vantage point.

Jan Kott notes that the inner world of Othello constitutes a landscape of his dreams, erotic obsessions and fears; it is darkness deprived of stars or the moon, (147) and finally of his guiding star, Desdemona. Indeed, in Nowiński's poster these two nightmarish perspectives meet: Desdemona's fears and Othello's obsessions are tightly interwoven, and his nightmare becomes her reality. Nowiński's poster holds its viewers in suspense: its dreamy atmosphere enhances the absurdity of Iago's intrigues, the naivety of Othello and the powerlessness of Desdemona. On the one hand, the image conveys Othello's nightmare of female sexuality; on the other, the same mixture of terror, eroticism and morbidity found in Fuseli's work, might be experienced in the scene of Desdemona's death. It is as if her nightmare was pulling Othello in.

## Conclusion

As a visual translation, adaptation or re-interpretation of Shakespeare's text, Nowiński's poster is overloaded with the iconographic and literary references, which constitute the poster's interpretation of Shakespeare's play. Although remarkably provocative and sensual, the poster manages to convey diverse roles others see Desdemona perform: that of a divine creature; one of "a fully sexual woman capable of 'downright violence' (I. iii. 249); and still another of 'A maiden, never bold' (I. iii. 94)" (Bartels 423):

The first [Desdemona] escapes her father 'guardage' (I. ii. 70) to elope with a Moor and insists on accompanying her husband to Cyprus—a military outpost

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<sup>16</sup> Keeping in mind the long tradition of the *sleeping Venus* composition, it is possible to assume that Fuseli's work alludes to the classical art as well: "The principal motifs in *The Nightmare* have been traced variously to sources in the antique and in the classicising works which Fuseli would have known [for example] the Bacchanalian scene on the marble sarcophagus," (Chappell 421) where one of the images presents Maenad who is lost in sleep; other influences are visible in Fuseli's painting as well, to mention only Titian.

in the play and the locus of Venus and 'very wanton' women in classical and other contemporary accounts—a dangerous place for a new wife to be on both counts. [...] The second, that 'perfect wife' and 'bodiless obedient silence' [...] emerges primarily in the play's second half and stands passively by as her husband destroys her reputation and her life. (423-24)

It is Titian's painting of Venus that seems to evoke the images of Renaissance obedient wives who, at the same time, remain independent, sexual beings. The intertextual relationship between Titian's and Nowiński's works enables the audience to appreciate Desdemona's all too human nature. Supported by the visual references, viewers become aware of the Venus-like quality of that female body that combines the features of a humble saint, a passionate lover, and a naïve girl who is determined to be happy. At the same time, the analysis of Shakespeare's text reveals the way Desdemona is treated by the male characters in the play. Like Fuseli's sleeping woman, she becomes an object of the dark desire. Consequently, it is highlighted that Desdemona constitutes an object of violence, and her identity, so clear at the beginning, is arrested through the male gaze, forcing her to struggle till the very end, to her death.

All the female figures discussed here seem to share significant features which enhance the multi-faceted vision of Shakespeare's Desdemona. Firstly, they are willingly or unwillingly caged in a narrow space, either of a curtained bed or a small clearing surrounded by dense bushes. Secondly, their bright bodies constitute a point of light that plays various roles for the males approaching them: a promise of fertility, desirable virginity, unspoiled beauty, a source of enlightenment. Thirdly, because they sleep, which is indicated usually by the arrangement of hands and their closed eyes, the women become an embodiment of the two contrasting notions: purity (the whiteness) and eroticism (conveyed by nudity, face expressions, body arrangement, etc.). In each case, this ambiguous image is enhanced by the combination of white and red sheets they are resting on. Finally, despite their characteristics, the painted women become the objects of a controlling gaze that become exposed for various reasons. Such an approach seals Desdemona's fate as an object of the curious, desiring glance.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, it becomes clear that Nowiński's poster generates the allusions to the play through the composition and colours, which help to

<sup>17</sup> In his article *Woman Asleep and the Artist* (1990) Udo Kulterman mentions several male and female artists that might be studied as an alternative background for the analysis of Nowiński's *Otello Desdemona* poster: Lygia Clark, Yayoi Kusama, Colette, Rimma Gerlovina, Natalia LI and Duane Michals. If Nowiński's poster is juxtaposed with works of art depicting sleeping women produced by artists from the second half of the twentieth century, Desdemona would be "liberated [...] from the status of being an object of manipulation by the other". (Kultermann 157)

understand the characters of Shakespeare's figures and their damaged relationship. These are further supported by the reference to several iconographic, historical, cultural, and literary sources, which not only follow the text in interpreting Desdemona's character, but also indicate an additional, if not alternative, interpretation of her role as *Venus Caelestis* and *Naturalis*, as well as a victimised girl similar to the character from Fuseli's painting. Consequently, the characters appearing in their painted environments become an essential background for the further interpretation of Desdemona and her design as a human goddess.

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