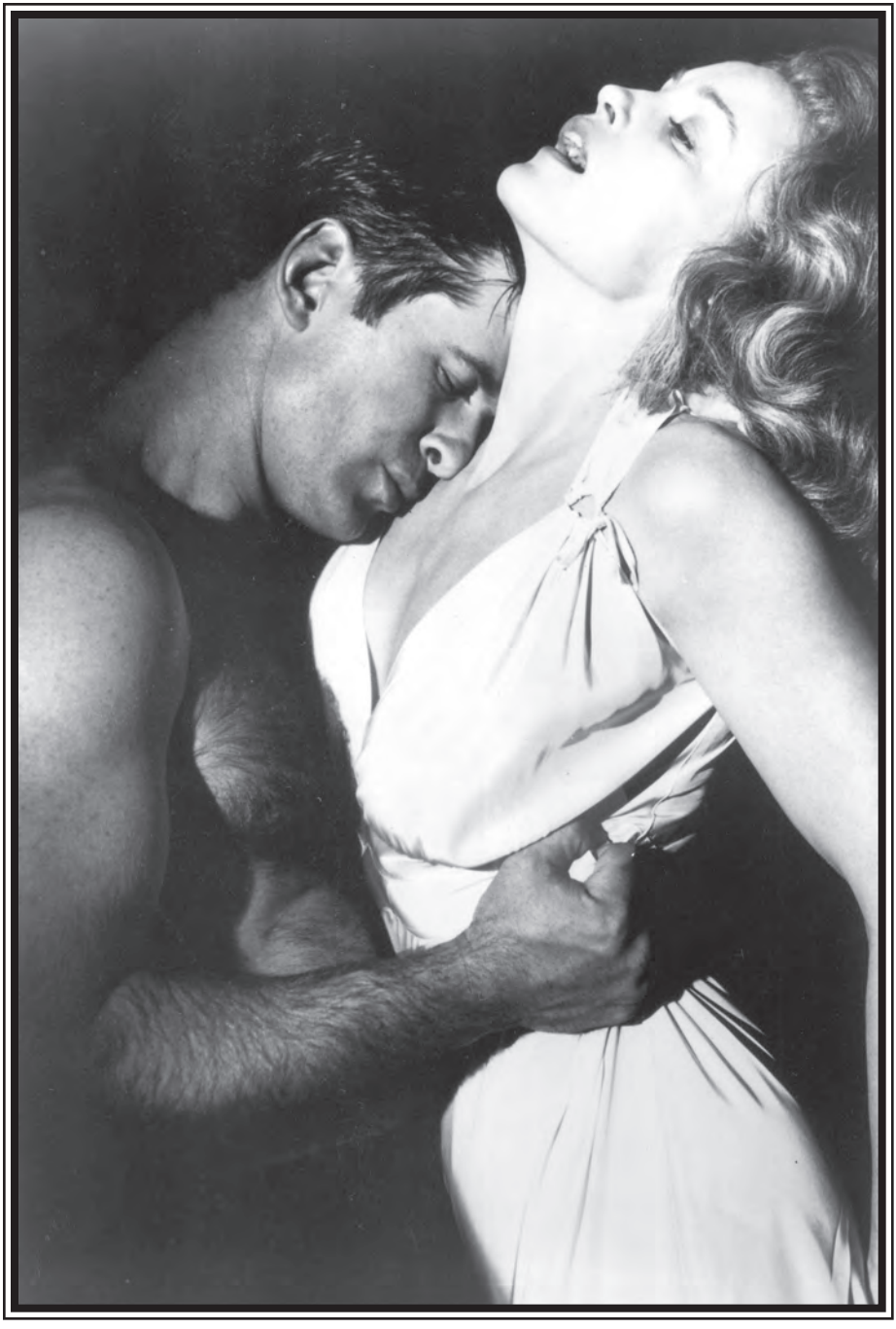

Alec Baldwin and Jessica Lange in the 1992 Ethel Barrymore Theatre production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Photofest.

Unraveling the "'Desdemona' Thing" in Tennessee Williams

M. Tyler Sasser

> *Othello* is Shakespeare's greatest play [. . .]. The dynamics of that play are so believable, so intense and the language is so beautiful.
> —Tennessee Williams (1974)

The "'Desdemona' thing" of my title is taken from a letter Tennessee Williams sent to Whitney Burnett in the fall of 1939 (211). Earlier that summer, Williams visited the home of Frieda Lawrence in Taos, New Mexico, and composed a short story entitled "Why Did Desdemona Love the Moor?"[1] Collectively, the fragments of this story record the tumultuous love affair between an alcoholic, aspiring female actor named Helen Jackson and David, an African American man whom she meets on an Italian-themed studio set and for whom she feels racially charged desire. In what follows, I suggest that this fragmented, unpublished story, held by the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, represents some of the earliest surviving ideas that would later materialize into *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The relation between this short story and *Streetcar* not only sheds light on the centrality of *Othello* to Williams's work but also offers insight into the racial and sexual dynamics and the dramatic aesthetic at work in Williams's play.

Scholars have long observed the intertextuality between Williams and Shakespeare, and this phenomenon is hardly surprising since he was immersed in Shakespeare's drama throughout his life. Williams "adored Shakespeare," according to Nancy M. Tischler ("Romantic Textures" 161), and in "What Was He Reading?," coauthored with Allean Hale, she insists that Williams "knew [. . .] Shakespeare" and "could quote bits of Shakespeare easily" (137). As a child, Tom traveled to Stratford-upon-Avon with his grandfather, and in an oft-quoted portion of a 1974 interview, he explained, "I began to read [Shakespeare] when I was a child. My grandfather had all of Shakespeare's works and I read them all by the time I was ten" ("Interview" [Brown] 269). Both Jacob Adler and Esther Merle Jackson have discussed Hamlet's relation to Blanche DuBois, while

Philip C. Kolin believes Shakespeare's Cleopatra is at the core of Blanche's character ("Cleopatra"). Lynn Sermin Meskill has helpfully cataloged a variety of Shakespearean echoes in *Streetcar*, and David Davis persuasively suggests that the family dynamics of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are partly indebted to *King Lear*.

This essay seeks to identify and trace explicit and implicit references to *Othello* in Williams's letters, interviews, and, most important, the unpublished short story "Why Did Desdemona Love the Moor?" (henceforth "Desdemona")—and in so doing, to reveal the influence of *Othello* on *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Despite Williams's expressed enthusiasm for the play, *Othello* has rarely entered into the critical conversation about Shakespeare's influence, and what references exist are often tentative. In a brief note, David-Everett Blythe calls attention to what he regards as an "apparently inadvertent Othello allusion" in *The Night of the Iguana* before remarking that critics may "be startled to hear from a Tennessee Williams character words that sound remarkably like verbatim Shakespeare in a phrasing that Shakespeare uses." Likewise, despite suggesting that Eunice Hubbell's criticism of "Stanley's outbursts of violence and injustices" resembles Emilia's criticism of men in *Othello*, Kolin carefully maintains he is "not arguing that Williams had *Othello* [. . .] in mind when he wrote Eunice's excoriation of Stanley" ("Eunice" 112–13). Such hesitation to call a resemblance an actual allusion is understandable. Yet one becomes perhaps less hesitant after recognizing Williams's deep and personal fascination with this play. In a 1974 interview, Williams mentions that in childhood he considered *Titus Andronicus*, "where the queen of the Goths eats two children [. . .] baked in a pie," to be his "favorite" Shakespeare play. However, such sentiments changed as he became an adult, and in the same interview he articulates his belief, as stated in the epigraph of this essay, that "*Othello* is Shakespeare's greatest play" because the "dynamics of that play are so believable, so intense and the language is so beautiful" ("Interview" [Brown] 269–70).

Though it may be impossible to ascertain precisely what "dynamics" in *Othello* Williams finds so powerfully convincing, scholarship on Williams points to at least three important leitmotifs that surface in both "Desdemona" and *Streetcar* and signal his admiration of *Othello*: 1) an interracial relationship (explicit in "Desdemona," implicit in *Streetcar*); 2) the complicated sexuality of the female protagonists; and 3) the precarious relationship between sexual desire and violence. I begin with the unpublished "Desdemona" in order to understand better Williams's explicit interest in *Othello* and explain how this short story anticipates key parts of *Streetcar*. Although "Desdemona" surfaces intermittently in critical footnotes, it has never occasioned serious attention from scholars. In *Notebooks*, editor Margaret Bradham Thornton observes that "Desdemona" is one of the earliest of Williams's works to include an "effeminate character" and also one of the first to allude to "lobotomies and mental illness such as dementia praecox" (40). In

their collection of Williams's early letters, Albert Devlin and Tischler briefly call attention to the story's many "allusions to gay Hollywood" (1: 213). However, this uncompleted short story warrants critical attention with regard to how it borrows from *Othello* and how such borrowings anticipate particular moments in *Streetcar*. Acknowledging Williams's interest in *Othello*, evident in this unpublished story and in interviews and correspondence dating roughly between 1939 and 1944, helps us recognize the interplay between *Othello* and *Streetcar*: in "Desdemona," scholars can see the possible origins of the unique and complicated mixture of purity and promiscuity in Blanche and trace them back to Shakespeare's Desdemona. Recognizing this relationship then helps one identify and examine the workings of the black presence that surfaces in *Streetcar*.

"Why Did Desdemona Love the Moor?": From *Othello* to Short Story

Between 1939 and 1941, at least two of Williams's letters mention "Why Did Desdemona Love the Moor?"—a short story first written during his visit to New Mexico in 1939. In a letter to Audrey Wood dated 24 August 1939, Williams states that he is "enclosing a story which might be converted into a play or a short novel if [she thinks] the material is interesting enough" (201). Three months later, he again refers to this story-in-progress when he writes to Whitney Burnett about "the 'Desdemona' thing" he mailed to Wood. He tells Burnett that "in its present form it is somewhat revolting," though it does contain "ample material for a long work" (211). According to Devlin and Tischler, at this time Williams had already written a few scenes that would eventually become part of *Streetcar*.[2] Though Williams is simultaneously writing this short story and early scenes of *Streetcar*, I do not wish to suggest that "Desdemona" is the sole source for the play. But Williams, long known for his copious rewrites, certainly appears to be thinking about some of the dynamics he admires in *Othello* while he writes "Desdemona" and begins *Streetcar*, and this short story deserves a more noteworthy place among the various drafts and revisions generally accepted as urtexts for *Streetcar*.[3]

Williams probably calls "Desdemona" "somewhat revolting" because of its fragmentation, not its content. The manuscript consists of seventy-six typed pages with minimal handwritten notes.[4] The first twenty-four pages are most likely the nearest Williams came to completing the story and are, for the most part, a fully developed short story.[5] The other pages are expansions or rewritings of particular scenes. The final twelve pages confirm that Williams was reimagining his prose as drama: they reconstruct "Desdemona" with more dialogue, with several pages already formatted into a script with stage directions. Together the fragments record the complicated and somewhat volatile relationship between the contemptuous actor Helen Jackson (whose name in some drafts is Gloria) and her romantic companion, a virile novelist named David (named Kip in some drafts). The "completed" story begins in a movie studio where Reynaldo, a gay

Hollywood producer, introduces Helen to David. The story catalogs their conversations on love, sex, rape, Hollywood, and insanity as they skinny-dip and spend their evenings in hotels and a cabin.

Williams's descriptions of Helen and David anticipate his depictions of Blanche and Stanley. David is constructed as a cruel, rude, often-grunting, hypermasculine male. Upon first meeting David, Helen remarks, "You look like a garage mechanic [. . .] one of those greasy, hairy irresistible men that climb all over your car in garages and make you feel like you're being raped by proxy" (3).[6] This description resembles a moment in *Streetcar* when, after eavesdropping on Stella and Blanche, Stanley appears and his wife observes, "You must've been under the car" (324). Stanley responds that he was forced to help "them darn mechanics"; hearing Blanche's degrading remarks helps propel him toward his rape of her. David's beautiful "all male" body, as Helen describes it ("Desdemona" n. pag.), is foreign to Helen in much the same way that Stanley is to Blanche. During their initial conversation, Helen thinks to herself that David "had some particular quality, or perhaps some secret knowledge, that made him foreign to her own world" (6). She asks, "Where are you from, David? . . . you seem uncivilized" to which he responds, "I am. . . . I've managed to escape domestication" (6, 7).

Williams depicts Helen as hiding behind alcohol, having trouble sleeping, disliking being alone, and refusing to face the sunlight for fear it might reveal her true age—all of which foresee Blanche. Whereas Blanche believes she must maintain her youthful appearance if she is to remain attractive to younger men, Helen makes an effort to keep hers because she recognizes how looks benefit her acting career. She goes to great lengths to make herself appear younger, since doing so gives her security. When she tells David she is "twenty-six," he laughs and responds, "I . . . didn't think it was possible for a woman to get as hard as you are in less than fifty years" (4). Stanley makes a similarly cruel comment when Blanche remarks, "I don't know why Stella wants to observe my birthday! I'd much rather forget it—when you—reach twenty-seven! Well—age is a subject that you'd prefer to—ignore!" Knowing she is lying, Stanley mockingly questions, "Twenty-seven?" (375). Helen cannot afford to make another unsuccessful film in the same way that Blanche—who also has failed in her occupation—cannot afford another unsuccessful relationship.

The short story and the play connect women's promiscuous pasts (Blanche's romantic interests from the Flamingo are well known in Laurel, and Helen admits that she "had married twice and lived with seven" [n. pag.][7]) to the difficulties in their current relationships and to their fates. Both Helen and Blanche are insulted by men for their promiscuity: Regarding the one woman David ever loved, Helen asks, "What did she have that I haven't?" and David harshly responds, "She had some spaces in her that didn't have to be filled with spermatozoa" (20).[8] Less graphically but no less judgmentally,

Stanley tells Stella that "the Flamingo is used to all kinds of goings-on. But even the management of the Flamingo was impressed by Dame Blanche!" (360). Blanche makes-believe she is pure by hiding behind her "old-fashioned ideals" (348); Helen, in some drafts, performs sexual innocence as she tries out for the part of a nun in an upcoming film. For both Blanche and Helen, the gap between their pasts and their performed selves may be contributing to their mental instability: *Streetcar* ends as a doctor carries Blanche to a state institution, and Helen suffers from the chronic mental illness "dementia praecox" (n. pag.). One draft of "Desdemona" ends when a new talent scout comes to take Helen away to Hollywood to try out for a new character. Her second chance anticipates Blanche's belief that she will have another opportunity at life once her stranger takes her to Shep Huntleigh.

The interracial potential that runs as an undercurrent in *Streetcar* appears more explicitly in "Desdemona." Though Williams never clearly states David's race in the more-or-less complete version of "Desdemona," in all other drafts, the playwright describes the character as African American. Interracial relationships were common in Williams's prose at this time: according to George W. Crandell, "In some of his short stories, a number written in the 1930s and 1940s (but not published until 1985), Williams writes explicitly about miscegenation, but even in plays such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* he broaches the topic" (339). Although Crandell does not specifically discuss "Desdemona," the "fascination with the fearful *and* desirable prospect of miscegenation" (339) that he locates elsewhere in Williams's work surfaces also in the tumultuous relationship between Helen and David and provides one answer to the story's titular question. In one version of the story, Helen immediately falls in love with David (called Kip in this particular draft), the author she meets on the movie set. She immediately notices "how dark his hand was, and then she remembered with a feeling of shock that this young man was a negro" (n. pag.). In another section, Helen asks, "You're a kind of colored Sir Galahad, aren't you?" Elsewhere she looks down Kip's collar at his "light, creamy brown skin," her "desire" growing "large and expansive" as she whispers, "I want you." Kip is also insultingly referred to as "the negro" or "a nigger" by Reynaldo and other racist characters. In one version, Reynaldo accuses Helen (Gloria in this draft) of loving David (Kip) only "because he's a nigger" before further commenting on her "desirous" infatuation:

> You're crazy for something new and this one's a nigger. It started out with disgust. It made you mad to have him sit at your table. Created a sort of sex antagonism. It stirred you up as you hadn't been stirred in years. And then he insulted you, didn't he? Told you to go to blazes! No other man on earth had ever done that. And so this kind of half-disgusted attraction turned into a passion for him, and you've been obsessed ever since.—Now get him to bed and get it out of your system. (n. pag.)

Reynaldo's interpretation of Helen and her interest in David is one way that some *Streetcar* characters—and perhaps readers—will later see Blanche, who, though fearing Stanley and disapproving of his heritage and social status, nevertheless persists in seeking his attention.[9]

The sequence of events that concludes "Desdemona" is thematically similar to both *Streetcar* and *Othello* in its violent juxtaposition of desire and destruction. The morning after their weekend getaway, Helen and David drive silently for several miles until Helen asks David to compare her to his first love, thus providing him another opportunity to comment on her promiscuity. She jumps out of the car, and David crashes into a cliff, thus causing a landslide: "The red dust enveloped everything, there was nothing but the furious choking of red dust and the terrible sound." Miraculously, they survive, leaving Helen to call the event "an absolution" (21).

The narrative of a sexual and antagonistic relationship that ends violently is one to which Williams would return. In the 1939 letter to Burnett that discusses "the 'Desdemona' thing," Williams also explains what he was trying to achieve at the end of "Desdemona":

> It was undertaken mainly as an experiment in katharsis. I built up a deliberate series of harsh and shocking effects with the intention [of] "purging" them in a sort of transcendental last scene. The last scene was not realized, the shocking effects were left unrelieved. The thing requires a good deal more deliberation before a second attack. (211–12)

Williams describes *Streetcar* in similar terms in a 1947 letter to Elia Kazan explaining his vision of the play. He writes, "It is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a katharsis of pity and terror" (96). Importantly, catharsis is one of the elements Williams claims to have most admired about Shakespeare. In 1960, he was asked about how Shakespeare "translated violence, savagery, and the terror of life into an overruling serenity," and Williams responded that "Shakespeare translated it into vast poetry, great poetry. [. . .] That is what gave the catharsis to Shakespeare" ("Interview" [Murrow] 76). Though Williams once commented that his own work "is always a struggle to achieve cathartic purity" ("Meeting" 210), the purging of these characters in "Desdemona" anticipates the ending of *Streetcar*. Helen's reaction to the landslide confirms as much: "It seemed to continue forever and in her mind was only the clean pure shaft of desire to escape destruction" (n. pag.). Helen and Blanche, like Desdemona before them, find themselves at the crossroads of desire and destruction. Indeed, the words "desire" and "desirous" appear throughout "Desdemona" with great frequency. For instance, the "antagonistic desire" that "rouses fury inside her" when Helen first meets David and the "fierce desire" that seizes her when she sees David's "nude male body" transform into a "desire to escape destruction" in the final paragraphs.

Such desire may reflect Williams's own interpretation of why Desdemona loved Othello. The most direct allusion to *Othello*, as well as the one that gives the story its name, occurs at the emotional center of the short story. Moments after refusing to skinny-dip with David, Helen recalls a moment from her youth when she "could recite from memory every speech of Desdemona's in the last two acts." In a flashback, Helen vividly remembers sitting in a classroom, and her English teacher, Miss Adams, asking the class, "Why did Desdemona love the Moor?" Helen answered:

> She loved the Moor . . . because he was dark and fatal! He had no patience with little things or little people! He came rushing into her sheltered, commonplace life like a storm and all the stupid, tiresome things were swept before him! In his actions he was cruel and savage but in his heart he was tender—and so she loved him, even when he suffocated her with the pillow, I think she loved him, she worshipped him like a god! (n. pag.)

The classroom setting of the flashback is another point of connection with Blanche, who was once an English teacher.[10] Blanche's explanation to Mitch that she has "the misfortune of being an English instructor" who must "attempt to instill a bunch of bobby-soxers and drugstore Romeos" (301–02) with literature recalls the moment in "Desdemona" when Miss Adams yells "That will do!" to two students who "snickered and whispered" at the *Othello* discussion (n. pag.). Helen's understanding of why Desdemona loved Othello also reveals some of her own sensual desires, and her answer hints at Blanche's infatuation with Stanley.

Further, just as Desdemona pursued a relationship that was taboo in her culture, so does Helen unwisely desire her own emotionally dangerous relationship. For instance, as Williams began rewriting "Desdemona" as a play, he developed this scene into a prologue:

> TEACHER: Helen?
>
> H: I think I know [. . .]. [E]verybody gets tired of little things in their lives, Miss Adams. You know. Unimportant, tiresome little things.
>
> TEACHER: Yes?
>
> H: And he—he came into her life like a storm, a great, dark, dangerous storm, and swept aside all little things. That's what he did, Miss Adams. And that's why I think she loved him. Yes, he was—dark and—fatal and—kind of perversely attractive. Not nice like the other men but something better than nice, something a lot more <u>thrilling</u>.
>
> MISS A: Yes?
>
> [. . .]
>
> H: [H]e had secrets inside him, knowledge of things that Desdemona didn't know of. He'd been in shipwrecks, disasters at sea, and in battles in foreign countries, he'd had all kinds of adventures that made him hard

> and savage. His actions were savage, Miss Adams, his actions were savage and cruel, but in his heart he was—tender. When she looked at him, Miss Adams, she knew she was looking at death, at her own destruction, but still she—she had to have him—because she desired him Miss Adams. She loved him, Miss Adams, even when he suffocated her with the pillow, I think she loved him, Miss Adams, she worshipped him like a god! (n. pag.)

Helen's understanding of why Desdemona desired Othello—because of his supposed otherness, dark secrets, savage actions, and largeness—reflects her own particular yearnings for the male protagonist in the short story while also anticipating how both Stella and Blanche react to Stanley. Stella tries to explain to her sister that "there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant," but Blanche calls these feelings "brutal desire—just—Desire!" (321). Indeed, Williams's unpublished short story showcases for the first time many of the important dynamics the playwright would later return to when he penned *Streetcar*, a play that like his short story borrows from *Othello*.

"'Othello' Made My Blood Run Cold. Christ, What Majesty!": From *Othello* to *Streetcar*

Othello informs *Streetcar* on many levels, from characterization to theme and even production history. Consider just one casting parallel: near the end of *Streetcar*'s two-year Broadway run, producer Irene Selznick decided to take the show on a national tour with Uta Hagen as Blanche.[11] Hagen had received critical acclaim earlier that decade for her portrayal of Desdemona opposite Paul Robeson's Othello.[12] Margaret Webster, who directed this seminal production, had recently directed Williams's first full-length play, *Battle of Angels*.[13] She told Hagen that "not since Ellen Terry had she seen a better Desdemona" (qtd. in Barranger 147).[14] While working to adapt "Desdemona" for the stage and beginning to compose *Streetcar*, Williams attended Webster's famous production (and at least one other *Othello*) and discussed it with great enthusiasm in his letters. In 1944 he wrote to James Laughlin that in Webster's production, "Robeson as 'Othello' made my blood run cold. Christ, what majesty!—All the rest here is piffle. Even the Cherry Orchard seems a little wilted" (520).[15] He lauded the same production in a letter to Margo Jones a few days later, describing Othello's "really majestic presence" (qtd. in Devlin and Tischler 1: 520). A year earlier Williams had attended another highly memorable production of *Othello*: "Onslow Stevens was superb as Othello and that last act revived my faith in poetic tragedy—God, what drama!" he wrote to Jones in 1943 (493).

Hence, some of the key scenes of *Streetcar* entered Williams's mind as he wrote "Desdemona," revised it for a longer play, watched the future director of his first play

direct a future Blanche as Desdemona, and described in majestic terms what would become the most famous and longest-running Broadway production of a Shakespeare play. Of course, despite the intense excitement over *Othello* expressed in his letters, it is impossible to know exactly what was in Williams's mind as he constructed *Streetcar*. Yet as Kolin claims, "Williams was astutely aware of the theatrical neighborhood in which his work competed. He realized that the meaning of one of his plays would be deepened and enriched by another work being performed near it [or] at the same time" ("Cleopatra" 25).

Understanding "Desdemona" as an expression of Williams's interest in *Othello* and as an early literary manifestation of *Streetcar* helps readers track the ways Shakespeare's play directly influences the dynamics of *Streetcar* and its characters. Despite the significant intersections between Desdemona and Blanche, it may seem easier initially to identify Stella as the more likely candidate for Williams's Desdemona. She, like her Shakespearean counterpart, is kind and full of compassion, and the two characters' devotion to their husbands have some features in common. Desdemona chooses Othello over her father, stating that just as her mother's duty changed once she married Brabantio, so must she likewise be committed to Othello. Desdemona is so committed to her husband that she remains by his side in Turkey and, as a result, misses her father's death and funeral. Likewise, as soon as Stella marries Stanley, she leaves Belle Reve and only returns briefly for her father's funeral, missing his death entirely. Both women crave their husbands when they are away. When a senator orders Othello to travel to Turkey, despite his having just married, Desdemona desperately responds, "To-night, my lord?" (1.3.278). The next evening, when Othello leaves their chambers to address the drunken brawl that interrupts their consummation, a frustrated Desdemona also leaves her bedchamber to search for her husband. Likewise, Stella tells her sister that she "can hardly stand it when [Stanley] is away for a night," and "[w]hen he's away for a week I nearly go wild!" (259).

The traditional interpretation of Desdemona as a benevolent and docile wife began to slip in mid-twentieth-century critical discussions that recognized the greater complexity in the character. While, as S. N. Garner explains in 1976, "[m]any critics and scholars come to Shakespeare's play with the idea that Desdemona ought to be pure and virtuous and, above all, unwavering in her faithfulness and loyalty to Othello" (234), other studies have identified her not only as a selfish and rebellious daughter but also as a sexual, even promiscuous character. W. D. Adamson, for instance, believes that "Desdemona's innocence coexists with a rich sexuality, and the conspicuous expression of her innocence is her vital exuberance, including the hot, moist hand of sexual vitality" (180). Jan Kott offers a much more frank, if somewhat sexist, interpretation when he identifies "something of a slut in her" (118).

Cumulatively, this critical position on Desdemona is nearly as one-dimensional as the original understanding of her as innocent and pure: it is the other extreme of the same reductive Madonna-versus-whore spectrum. Blanche is often relegated to that restrictive binary as well, by critics and by other characters in the play—a choice that oversimplifies Williams's exploration of the contrast between her performed innocence and her sexual vitality. Critics who see Desdemona as an adulteress or even a whore, such as she is accused of being by her husband, may be ignoring the fact that the play presents a genuine prostitute in the character of Bianca, to whom Cassio presents himself as a "customer" (4.1.119) and whom Iago identifies in soliloquy as a "huswife that by selling her desires / Buys herself bread and clothes" (4.1.94–95). Critics tempted to read Blanche or Helen similarly reductively should note that there are elements of both Bianca and Desdemona in Helen and in Blanche. In an early untitled draft of *Streetcar*, Williams names the Blanche character "Bianca," and while the final appellation, "Blanche DuBois," may literally mean "white woods," the name—like Shakespeare's "Bianca"—ironically signifies sexual purity (Dickson 158–60). In the "Bianca" draft of *Streetcar*, all three main characters are, like Desdemona and Bianca, Italian, and in some of the drafts of "Desdemona," Helen auditions for the role of a Venetian nun. While it would certainly be difficult to argue for Blanche's sexual innocence, she at least knows how to play the role for Mitch and probably many other men in Laurel, as Othello fears Desdemona is doing for him. Blanche is at least a zodiacal virgin, as she explains to Stanley: "Oh, my birthday's next month, the fifteenth of September; that's under Virgo. [. . .] Virgo is the Virgin" (329). Her zodiac sign is an irony, one that resonates with the possibility that Desdemona dies a virgin—and with the possibility that Desdemona is, like Blanche, a virgin in name only.

Another image associated with both Desdemona and Blanche is a moth. In interviews and letters Williams states that he always thought of Blanche as being like a moth, and in a stage direction in *Streetcar*, he writes that "*there is something about* [Blanche's] *uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth*" (245). Several critics have discussed this reference, and Greta Heintzelman and Alycia Smith-Howard are representative of these responses: "Williams compares her to a moth, symbolically stressing her fragility, purity, and virtue" (273). They also posit Blanche's capacity for metamorphosis—from southern belle to whore to coquette to accused and ruined woman—as a lepidopteran characteristic (273). Likewise, early in *Othello* Desdemona memorably describes herself as a "moth of peace" (1.3.256), and like Blanche, she undergoes a series of transformations, from rebellious daughter to wife to accused whore to victim.

Understanding Helen—who is explicitly associated with Desdemona—as an early version of Blanche highlights the ways romantic relationships in *Streetcar* echo *Othello* and makes the interracial undercurrent in *Streetcar* more visible. Othello's race

complicates his relationship with Desdemona, and for many viewers in an early modern audience it would have been the single most damning aspect of the relationship.[16] Such bigoted attitudes are featured in the play's opening scene, in the racial slurs with which the Venetians brand Othello. The titular character is not named until the third scene. Until then, he is a "black ram" (1.1.88), a "Barbary horse" (111–12), one half of the "beast with two backs" (116–17), and a "lascivious Moor" (126). These animal images confirm Shakespeare's protagonist as a bestial other in the eyes of the Venetians and possibly his audience.

Like his Moorish counterpart, Stanley is characterized as other in terms of both his nationality and biology—not only by the other characters onstage but also in the stage directions. According to Vivienne Dickson, when "Williams made Stanley a son of peasant immigrants and the sisters relics of a decayed southern aristocracy, he retained their national temperamental resemblances while creating a new dimension to the conflict with the addition of cultural differences" (159). For instance, when asked by Blanche to describe her husband, Stella calls him a "different species" (258), and through stage directions Williams describes the "*animal joy* [. . .] *implicit in all his movements and attitudes*" (264). During their poker game Mitch tells Stanley to go "rut," a way of telling him to settle down (288). When Stanley and Stella reconcile after the card game incident, Williams describes their apologies as "*low, animal moans*" (307). Moreover, Blanche describes the "animal force" (319) Stanley uses to get his way before calling him "downright *bestial*" (322). Of course, the most vivid description of Stanley's animalism occurs the morning after the poker game in Blanche's famous "He acts like an animal" speech that bluntly accentuates how she sees Stanley as other (323). In this context, Blanche's anti-Polish prejudice ("You healthy Polack, without a nerve in your body, of course you don't know what anxiety feels like!" [374]) amounts to a xenophobic equation of national heritage with species, in the process revealing to readers why they might recognize racial otherness in Stanley.

These otherized descriptions not only recall Othello and David but also signal a metaphorical black presence—perhaps unsurprising, given that miscegenation is present in some of Williams's short stories from the 1930s and 1940s. The cover of the first edition of *Streetcar* telegraphs the play's racial subtext,[17] and directors have long sought to expose what traditional stagings based on the Kazan Broadway production kept hidden. Indeed, nontraditional stagings of the play aid audiences in recognizing not only the general presence of race as a theme in *Streetcar* but also the more specific presence of *Othello.*

In a 1983 performance of *Streetcar* in Berkeley, director Charles Gordon cast an actor of color for Stanley and white actors for all the other roles. A rumor had been circulating that Williams originally intended for Stanley to be African American. Gordon was

familiar with this rumor when he discussed the reasoning behind his casting decision (note his interesting misquotation of *Streetcar*, in which he turns Williams's original word "brutes" into "apes"):

> I never heard Tennessee Williams say that he had originally intended Stanley to be black. Nor have I ever heard Elia Kazan mention it. But I did hear it rumored about in black theatre circles . . . The first time I heard it was by the late Frank Silvera, the well-known black actor in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet Blanche's warning to Stella "not to hang back with the apes" and other derogatory remarks fit very well with the fact that Stanley in her institutionally bigoted mind came from "a lower order."
>
> There were those who thought casting Stanley as a black man reinforced the stereotype . . . a black Stanley raping Blanche, a white woman, could be construed that way. (qtd. in Kolin, *Williams* 132–33)

Gordon's vision of a black Stanley, like Blanche's long speech in scene 4, recalls Williams's early short story "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll." In this story, written while Williams was in college and published posthumously, the "strange, savage, inarticulate" Big Black peers through a cluster of bushes "like a great black animal" and sees a white, nude girl skinny-dipping moments before the near-rape scene (27, 31). Likewise, "Desdemona" similarly turns violent when David rapes Helen. He believes that "one has to conform to the other or else there's an endless struggle that wears them both out," and Helen realizes that their relationship is "a division of forces in passionate opposition." David climbs on her, and though she "struggle[s] to free herself" and begs, "David, let me go!," the stronger partner "laugh[s] at her between his teeth exactly the way that the villain laughed in the earliest movies, which made it a nightmare to her until she stopped struggling and let the warmth overcome her" (n. pag.).

The climaxes of the two plays are inversely related. In *Othello*, Desdemona is symbolically raped and literally murdered; in *Streetcar*, Blanche is symbolically murdered and literally raped. In this way, the final scene in the bedroom chambers of *Othello* prefigures Stanley and Blanche's encounter in scene 10. According to Arthur L. Little, Othello's "relationship to Desdemona cannot be separated from a discourse of rape" (5): "Othello's murdering Desdemona in their wedding-bed sheets, producing an orgasmic 'death' that is 'unnatural' because it 'kills' (5.2.42), brings closure to this drama of *raptus*, of bride theft—of rape" (87). Freud, in his essay "The Sexual Aberrations," famously describes the "desire to inflict pain upon the sexual object" as the "most common and the most significant of all the perversions" (23). Just before entering Desdemona's chambers, Othello vows, "Thy bed, lust-stain'd, shall with lust's blood be spotted," but it is a tender moment just before he kills Desdemona (5.1.36). He thrice kisses his sleeping wife, and readers get a sense of Othello's love for her when he weeps and says, "This sorrow's heavenly, / It strikes where it doth love" (5.2.21–22). Though Blanche will "survive" her

Othello, she is, as Kolin puts it, "symbolically murdered—and then miraculously reborn in madness" ("Cleopatra" 26).

Both women believe that their respective ends are near. Desdemona nervously suspects that her husband might murder her, and she expresses this concern to Emilia: "My mother [. . .] had a song of 'Willow,' / An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune, / And she died singing it. That song to-night / Will not go from my mind" (4.3.26, 28–31). Blanche expresses her anxiety over pending death much more directly to Mitch: "The first time I laid eyes on [Stanley] I thought to myself, that man is my executioner!" (351). (As Stanley approaches Blanche in the bedroom, her exclamation "Some awful thing will happen!" [401] also matches Helen's commentary, voiced seconds before the ending of "Desdemona," almost word for word: "Something awful was about to happen" [n. pag.].) Othello declares that Desdemona "must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6); Stanley claims to have revealed Blanche's tainted past to prevent her deceiving another man: "Mitch is a buddy of mine. We were in the same outfit together. [. . .] We work in the same plant and now on the same bowling team. [. . .] I told him! I'd have that on my conscience the rest of my life if I knew all that stuff and let my best friend get caught!" (365–66). Finally, one may hear in Stanley's changing into the "silk pyjamas [he] wore on [his] wedding night" (395) an echo of Desdemona's request that Emilia "[l]ay on [her] bed [her] wedding-sheets" (4.2.105).

The rape scene in *Streetcar* continues to recall *Othello* as Williams again associates Stanley with blackness, animality, and promiscuity. As he approaches Blanche, a stage direction explains how the scene should be staged: "*The night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle*. [. . .] *Some moments later the Negro Woman appears around the corner with a sequined bag which the prostitute dropped on the walk*" (399). When *Streetcar* was performed in Paris in 1949, director Jean Cocteau accentuated what Kolin calls the play's "vibrant black presence" in this scene by including black belly dancers (*Williams* 72), described at the time by a review in *Les Nouvelles* as "well endowed Negresses" gyrating topless in the bedroom while Stanley raped Stella. The French reviewer went on to say, "Cocteau's is a dark play—and made dark especially by black male and female extras whose appearance enhances the most dramatic moments and reminds us that the play takes place in New Orleans" (qtd. in Kolin, *Williams* 72).

The reference to a "sequined bag [. . .] dropped on the walk" is particularly illuminating, since it speaks to the lost accessory—one dropped by a woman and found by another woman—that is the central icon of *Othello*. If the handkerchief in *Othello* is, as James Hodgson calls it, "an emblem of [Desdemona's] reputation" (317), then the same may be said of the prostitute's bag. Indeed, Williams emphasizes the bag's importance by interrupting the intense confrontation between Stanley and Blanche with this specific detail. For Lynn Sermin Meskill, the bag becomes a "suddenly over-determined, female,

emblem of sexuality," and the Negro Woman, "rooting excitedly through the bag like a grunting pig, has been associated [with] the underside, hidden carnival side of sex" (156). Finally, as Stanley approaches the Desdemona-like Blanche, helplessly trapped on her bed, this stage direction follows: "*The inhuman jungle voices rise up. He takes a step toward her, biting his tongue which protrudes between his lips*" (401). Perhaps here Williams again thinks of *Othello*, where Desdemona asks her assailant Othello as he prepares to kill her, "[W]hy gnaw you so your nether lip?" (5.2.43). Although we cannot know whether Williams intended the stage direction to be an allusion to *Othello*, we should remember that no detail was too small for an author who once described his plays in a production note from *The Glass Menagerie* as "delicate or tenuous material" for a theatre of "atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction" (131).

There is more scholarly value in identifying Williams's uses of Shakespeare than is granted by such critics as Donald Fanger, who contend that "the very concept of 'influence' [. . .] has always appealed more to the cataloguing than to the critical mind" (253). Williams, to quote Brian Parker, was a "maniacal reviser who put every work through many drafts, pieced final texts together like mosaics, and claimed no play of his should ever be considered finished" ("'Going'" 257): later works revisit and rework themes and influences evident in early works, and Shakespeare influences Williams much more than has hitherto been discussed. "Cataloguing" the overt references to *Othello* in the unpublished "Desdemona"—an early, if not the very earliest, precursor to *Streetcar*—sheds light on Williams's reading of Shakespeare's play and thus aids critique of *Streetcar* and its characters. Knowing how frequently the playwright recited and discussed Shakespeare and how much he particularly praised *Othello* allows readers to engage with many of these characters in new and illuminating ways, and as Williams said of other plays compared to the Webster production of *Othello*, "the rest here is piffle."

Notes

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[1] Williams visited Frieda Lawrence while he was conducting research at the Harwood Foundation for a play about her husband, D. H. Lawrence.

[2] A few months before traveling to Taos, he wrote a play titled "Death of a Legend," which is, according to Devlin and Tischler, based partly on the career of Williams's travel companion at the time, Jim Parrott (1: 191). Parrott was hoping to become a "rising star in motion pictures," much like the protagonist in "Desdemona," and some of the "Death of a Legend" scenes written in 1939 "prefigure key scenes in *A Streetcar Named Desire*" (191).

[3] For a thorough discussion on the textual origins of *Streetcar*, including a list of published and unpublished titles that influenced the play, see Dickson's "*A Streetcar Named Desire*: Its Development through the Manuscripts."

[4] Sometimes Williams includes page numbers in this manuscript, and sometimes he does not. Therefore, I have included his pagination when he includes it, and when the manuscript is without pagination, I have relied on the generic "n. pag."

[5] There are a couple of small, blank sections throughout the manuscript, suggesting Williams was, as always, rethinking certain parts—but the more or less complete version does include numbered sections that transition smoothly, a title, and a signature with date and name of writing location.

[6] Williams rewrites this description thrice more in the document. In each of these occasions, David's race is implicated in the insult. For instance, in one version he responds, "What you meant to say is that I am a negro," and Helen looks at Reynaldo and thinks to herself, "why did you bring this nigger to make me upset when I've got to start work on a picture?" (35).

[7] This number is considerably higher in one of the earlier fragments of the story: "I told you how many affairs I've had! Thirty-six! Ten more than the years I've been living!—No wonder you think I'm a bitch!" (n. pag.).

[8] Elsewhere in the manuscript, David calls Helen a whore in a more subtle way, when they enter a hotel room with mirrors fastened to the ceiling above the bed. "French courtesans had them," he tells her. She replies by saying that she is not French, and David says, "I believe the profession is international though" (n. pag.).

[9] After her first bath, Blanche asks Stanley to help her dress while "fishing for a compliment" about her looks (278). Immediately after their first argument, she tells Stella, "I called him a little boy and laughed and flirted. Yes, I was flirting with your husband" (285). She later exclaims to Stella, "[T]he only way to live with such a man is to—go to bed with him! And that's your job—not mine!" (319).

[10] I am grateful to Mark Dahlquist for calling my attention to the connection between this flashback and Blanche's occupation.

[11] Hagen was Jessica Tandy's understudy in New York and briefly played Blanche in 1948.

[12] Robeson has the distinction of being the first African American to play Othello in an otherwise all-white cast.

[13] Webster's *Othello* premiered at the Shubert Theatre on 19 October 1943 and ran for 296 performances. It remains the longest-running Shakespeare production ever on Broadway. Webster's *Battle of Angels*, however, had a short run, and when the twenty-nine-year-old Williams heard of the play's closing, he told Webster, "Oh, but you can't do that! Why, I put my heart in this play." Webster, an Englishwoman known primarily for her Shakespeare productions, replied with a bit of advice from *Othello*: "You must not wear your heart on your sleeve for daws to peck at" (qtd. in Barranger 116). Edith King, who played Beulah Cartwright in *Battle of Angels*, was cast as Bianca for Webster's *Othello*.

[14] Ellen Terry (1847–1928) was an English actor who famously played Desdemona and many other Shakespearean heroines throughout her long career.

[15] Scholars routinely cite Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* as one of Williams's favorite dramas and the one that most influenced his work. See Gilbert Debusscher's "Creative Rewriting" and Drewey Wayne Gunn's "'More Than Just a Little Chekhovian.'"

[16] Ben Saunders claims that interracial sex was as great a transgression in Renaissance England as homosexuality and adultery and that Desdemona and Othello's marriage would have been considered "sodomitical" (151).

[17] The well-known pink dust jacket portrays three simply drawn, stick-like characters. The two solid white female characters dangle beneath the arms of the much larger black male character, almost like marionettes.

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