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Living Words; Dying Flesh: The Truth and Testimonies of Desdemona in Othello and Pompilia in The Ring and the Book

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Living Words; Dying Flesh: The Truth and Testimonies of Desdemona in *Othello* and

Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book*

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which Desdemona in William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603/4) and Pompilia in Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868) exemplify female characters whose testimonies highlight their souls' salvation and demonstrate that they ultimately transcend their domestic roles. This thesis engages historical scholars who discuss the tensions between the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches and the state in early modern and Victorian England, and literary scholars who focus on Desdemona and Pompilia as either submissive or possessing agency. This thesis includes the work of developmental psychologist, Carol Gilligan, to show how Desdemona and Pompilia emphasize care and community. This thesis concentrates on historical and religious backgrounds, with a focus on martyrdom, testimony, equivocation, hagiography, and femininity. Furthermore, it compares Desdemona's and Pompilia's speeches to those of their husbands through close readings of the primary texts. Desdemona's and Pompilia's adherence to spiritual salvation and relationship, as shown through their use of testimonial and martyrological rhetoric, ultimately reveals they have agency and power over their stories.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the light of the #MeToo Movement, and our contemporary fascination with truth and trauma, in this study I set out to engage fictitious female characters who live within two distinct patriarchal cultures, are abused in their marriages, and, despite this, are given the opportunity to vocalize their plight. Separated by 250 years, Desdemona in William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603/04) and Pompilia in Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868) both exemplify this characterization. Although the works I focus on were written by men, the female characters are given agency through speech in order to tell their stories. A strong connection exists between the religious rhetoric these characters use and the way in which they show their authority. In our contemporary engagement with testimonies of female victims of abuse and violence, the question of doubt we place on testimony seems to mirror what is embedded in the pieces on which I focus. I strive to highlight the way in which literature transcends cultural and temporal understanding of gender roles and to suggest how it can promote further discussion about testimony and abuse within our own time.

Although this study crosses eras and genres, the use of rhetoric of testimony in the dying words of Desdemona and Pompilia bridges these seemingly disparate works of literature. Many studies focus on Shakespeare's influence on Browning; however, few mention a direct correlation between *Othello* and *The Ring and the Book*. Marguérite Corporaal (2002) indicates that Shakespeare's treatment of Desdemona may have paved

the way for other Jacobean playwrights to write female characters with more agency. If we take this as evidence that the view of the power of women, or at least of the spoken word, changed over the centuries, it may be pertinent to think about how the act of speech, and the speaker, evolves in depiction of character as well. Whether or not a direct link exists between *Othello* and *The Ring and Book*, both pieces feature female characters who are falsely accused of sin—adultery—and are murdered by their husbands. Both works allow the viewer or reader access to the protagonists' final words. The initial question of whether Desdemona and Pompilia are written to have authority over their stories and by what authority engages the connection between the religious context of testimony and martyrological rhetoric within their speeches. Desdemona and Pompilia suffer at the hands of their husbands, yet they display their authority as they increasingly rely on their spiritual salvation over physical death. Ultimately, I argue that Desdemona and Pompilia utilize martyrological rhetoric in their final testimonies to display this authority, eventually transcending their earthly roles after they reclaim power over their stories.

Much scholarship has concentrated on the changing religious atmosphere of both Elizabethan/Jacobean England and Victorian England. The fact that both Shakespeare and Browning were writing within an Anglican society, yet were still familiar with Roman Catholic ideology, seems important. This is where scholarship on religion is useful, as the characters, and especially the female characters, were presumably of the Roman Catholic faith. Within the context of that faith, Paula M. Kane (2002) highlights the idea of the *Victim Soul* and notes the way in which female believers were encouraged

to take on this role as their suffering—both physical and mental—would allow them to alleviate the suffering of others, frequently as a way to mimic the life of Christ. Although the notion of *Victim Soul* surfaced around WWI, one can trace the idea back to the medieval pilgrimages to Lourdes, to the early modern saints and to the cult of stigmatics, and to the Sacred Heart iconography of the 19th century. *Victim Souls*, it should be noted, were predominantly women. As such, this term provides a useful link to scholarship on the religiosity of Desdemona's and Pompilia's characters and the societies in which Shakespeare and Browning both lived. Kane's analysis will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Shakespeare's early modern England experienced a stark shift in religious affiliation, from Roman Catholic to Protestant. In her study on religion in early modern England, Patricia Crawford (1992) focuses on the way in which religious belief gave women power over their social circumstances within that time. Robert N. Watson (2002) argues that this cultural and religious transformation directly affected the plays being performed in early modern England, where the "revenge tragedy" surfaced as a reflection of and an answer to this phenomenon. Similar to Watson's discussion of theater and religion, Regina M. Schwartz (2005) specifically discusses the way in which theater in early modern England substituted tragedy and drama for the Roman Catholic notion of receiving grace through the Eucharist and Mass. She emphasizes the concept that theater became an arena for justice to be upheld and for sacrifice to be represented but not, as in the Roman Catholic Mass, reenacted. Shakespeare's *Othello* is an example of this, where Othello acts as a priest/murderer and Desdemona becomes the Christ figure. Clifford

Ronan (2002) also indicates Desdemona's role against the satanic Iago and "alien" Othello, noting that the characters' views of marriage and love are dictated by their respective religions. Again, he aligns Desdemona with the Virgin Mary and Christ.

Randa Helfield (2006) and Charles LaPorte (2011) likewise discuss the religious and spiritual connotation regarding Browning's work. In response to the changing Biblical interpretive tradition in Victorian England, Browning provides his own commentary and perspective within his poetry. Helfield notes the interesting display of spirituality and mysticism in Browning's poetry yet focuses on Guido's speeches to argue that Browning embedded echoes and repetitions of Pompilia's story, as if she haunts Guido within his own monologues and thus reveals her innocence and truth. LaPorte focuses on how Browning specifically embeds Roman Catholic hagiography within the monologues regarding Pompilia, where she utilizes the virgin-martyr role in her speeches as a way to "redeem" herself against the accusations. Watson (2002), Schwartz (2005), and Ronan (2002), along with Helfield (2006) and LaPorte (2011) all suggest that religious imagery and allusion function heavily in regard to the female characters in *Othello* and *The Ring and the Book*, respectively. By reading Desdemona and Pompilia as both figures of Christ and/or Virgin saints and the Virgin Mary, these critics identify the possible ways in which Desdemona and Pompilia uphold their purity and are absolved of their alleged crimes.

Much of the religious context for this study is invested in the notion and definition of testimony and confession, and the legal connotation runs parallel to this. Fernando Vidal (2007) and Sarah Covington (2014) both offer insightful analysis of the role of

judicial discourse regarding the testimony of martyrs and the subject of sainthood, respectively, that suggest an interplay between law and religious rhetoric. Martyrs and martyrologists used legal rhetoric and the Pauline concept of Old and New Law to display the authority they possessed from their unwavering faith. They assumed the role of God's witness and the promise of everlasting life. Martyrs and saints were both reliant on testimonial evidence and were judged by figures of authority. Importantly, Browning also wrote his poem to revive a court case from Renaissance Italy, and thus the legal senses of testimony and confession appear in the context of his work even more specifically.

For example, Laura Struve (2008) asserts that Browning's dramatic monologue reflects the faultiness of the adversarial legal system and reforms that surfaced throughout Victorian England, while the Pope's monologue ultimately upholds a truth that the lawyers and societal figures cannot. [This concurs with a reading of Guido as a figure whose ideals of a just society are not sustained. His testimony allows him to speak to his own perceived abuse by society (Ackerman 20007).] A nice linking point, and a critical component to the inclusion of confession and testimony in my examination, is Ann-Marie Dunbar's article, "Now for Truth! Confession and Testimony in *The Ring and the Book*" (2009), in which she analyzes Guido's two monologues. Dunbar engages specifically the legal aspects of confession and testimony, and her reading of Guido illuminates other scholarship on Guido's monologues, like that of Robert Langbaum's article, in which he argues that Guido is ultimately saved by the very fact that he understands his crime (Langbaum 1972). Most importantly, Dunbar's article offers a possible comparison with

scholarship on the hagiography of Pompilia (LaPorte 2011) and the silence and Christlike-ness of Desdemona (Grennan 1987; Callaghan 1989; Ronan 2002).

These hagiographic readings of Desdemona and Pompilia suggest that their characters are infallible. However, in *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (1989), Dympna Callaghan asserts that female transgression is a common theme in tragic plots. Characters like the Malcontent figure, with which Iago is affiliated, use female transgression and misogynistic discourse as a means to their end, whether truthful or not. Likewise, Guido attempts to reconstruct Pompilia's adultery to justify his murderous act. If transgression is central to the plots of both *Othello* and *The Ring and the Book*, and the testimonies of the female protagonists are crucial for undermining the male characters' accusations, then religion functions as a source of power and authority in each to exhibit their truths and authority in the face of adversity. Like Covington's martyrs and Vidal's saints, the judgment of testimony and the truth it offers in these appeals to religious authority mirror Desdemona's and Pompilia's rhetorical strategies to display their truth.

Worth noting, and important to my study, is that Desdemona and Pompilia not only exemplify saintly women or martyrs, but they also utilize martyrological rhetoric in their testimonies. They pardon other characters and proclaim their innocence, and they also utilize the technique of equivocation to maintain the safety of others. Ellen Macek (1988) and John R. Knott (1993) each discuss the plights and rhetorical strategies of Protestant martyrs in early modern England. They both highlight the disparate notions of physical weakness and spiritual strength through Christ upon which the martyrs relied. Alice Dailey (2012) also focuses on early modern martyrdom. However, her discussion

includes specifically Roman Catholic martyrs under Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. Dailey's discourse on the use of equivocation is of utmost importance for this study.

In addition to the religious context of testimony, one must consider how gender informs the reading of the female characters. The wealth of scholarship on both Desdemona and Pompilia reflects trends and evolving understanding of both characters. Most critics, however, diverge when it comes to the agency or submission that Desdemona does or does not display. Past scholarship tended to lean more toward reading Desdemona as wholly obedient, where more recent scholarship has focused on a progression of her character. Eamon Grennan (1987) and Sara Munson Deats (2002) both engage Desdemona's seeming outspokenness at the beginning of the play, noting her descent to total submission at the end. Grennan reflects on Desdemona's striving to be Othello's equal, while maintaining that in the end, her final speech seems to act as a "protective lie" for Othello. Likewise, Deats focuses on Desdemona's and Othello's views of marriage and notes the progression from equal partnership to total suppression in the play's final act. Tina Packer (2016) also applauds Desdemona's courage and loyalty in the beginning of the play yet concludes that Desdemona is killed for consistently telling the truth and even manages to place total blame on herself before she dies. Desdemona, argues Packer, is not able to break free from the societal structures. Michael Slater (2019) suggests that Desdemona's status as a lady of the court is the source of her dissimilar speeches and her simultaneously coy and submissive attitude, but it is also the cause of her downfall. None have argued against Desdemona's purity; however, the belief in Desdemona's underlying agency is worth considering. If

Desdemona does not inherently have agency or power, then how do the other characters believe her final words at all? And from what authority?

Scholarship on Pompilia has been no less contentious. Again, earlier critics noted Pompilia's absolute goodness and read her as purely innocent (Langbaum 1963). It is also important to note that some have pointed out the popularity of Browning's dramatic monologue and the subsequent praise or even worship of Pompilia in terms of her goodness and purity. The cult-like admiration may coincide with the notion of gendered suffering in the Roman Catholic faith, as discussed by Paula M. Kane (2002), as Pompilia also attempts to exonerate Caponsacchi and even Guido. Her characterization may be evidence of the ideal of the female in Victorian times or at least within the religious community.

More recent scholarship, however, has suggested that Pompilia is craftier and more aware of her situation than critics formerly argued. William Walker, in "Pompilia and Pompilia" (1984), asserts that Pompilia's speech is rife with irony, sarcasm, and understanding. These rhetorical and tonal strategies indicate her understanding of her situation and audience. Walker's article is of the earliest that reads Pompilia with a less idolizing approach. Others such as Susan Brown (1996), Stephen Jeffcoate (2006), and Katherine Anne Gilbert (2011) also reflect on Pompilia's monologue as a way in which she can assert herself and tell her story. Brown remarks on the rhetoric of Pompilia's speech as Walker does, and even compares Browning's Pompilia to the historical person, who was literate, as Jeffcoate does. These more contemporary readings offer insight into a character who has more agency and understanding, and unlike Desdemona, critics raise

the possibility of Pompilia's guilt at times, which indicates another link to the genre of testimony. Pompilia's testimony as opposed to Guido's confession could be likened to the approach taken by Covington's martyrs and their reliance on religious authority to display their truth against the worldly perspectives of their persecutors.

Overall, my argument relies heavily on the critical analysis of scholars such as those mentioned above, as these provide the starting points in my discussion of the characters. However, I also highlight the female characters' agency through their use of martyrological rhetoric and their reliance on spiritual authority, and this is where the scholarship of Crawford, LaPorte, Kane, and Dailey, among others, is most helpful. I also include developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan's 1982 study on women's moral development. Gilligan's theory remarkably helps illuminate the ways in which Desdemona and Pompilia interpret their circumstances through a lens of care and community. Furthermore, my analysis of the foundation of thought surrounding the testimonial mode or genre is a critical component to my research. I find not only do the victims—Desdemona and Pompilia—testify to what has happened to them, but that Othello's and Guido's confessions and judgments offer contrasting elements within my argument.

Scholarship on nearly all the characters mentioned has withdrawn from black-and-white readings of the characters, which I believe is a positive thing. I argue that Desdemona's final moments are an indication, not of her obedience to her husband, but of her taking control of the narrative to give herself some agency in the play. Furthermore, I side with Langbaum's notion that Guido is saved not from an apology, but

at least by his admittance of the crime he committed. I also find Guido's final words point to his reliance on Pompilia's own salvation and the power of her testimony. Pompilia is possibly the one character who seems to have more agency in how her story is told and her innocence upheld.

If one takes Desdemona and Pompilia as on trial, then one could read them as on trial to exonerate themselves, but also on trial to appeal to a higher religious authority likened to martyrs—both Protestants who appealed to forgiveness and mercy and Roman Catholics who relied on equivocation to testify. Therefore, I take a categorical approach to this study. I begin by discussing the religious atmosphere in early modern England, noting the way the Roman Catholic principles of testimony resonated within the culture despite the changing dogmas within the Church. I focus heavily on the aspects of martyrdom in Desdemona and Pompilia. I also discuss the role of religion in Victorian England, utilizing the scholarship above to frame and illuminate my understanding of testimony.

Next, I turn attention to *Othello* specifically. In this chapter, I show how Desdemona utilizes martyrological rhetoric—and importantly, equivocation—in order to preserve her innocence and protect those around her. I engage the speeches of both Desdemona and Othello to understand their discourse as it relates to Desdemona's duty and innocence. By analyzing Desdemona's and Othello's different notions of justice, I hope to set up a comparative discussion that will be effective in my interpretation of Desdemona's appeal to authority figures wherein she allows herself agency regarding her story and legacy. Desdemona problematizes her seeming submission to Iago's narrative

by her final act of exonerating Othello and her final words. If her testimonies leading up to her murder are any indication, she strove to remain a dutiful wife to Othello despite his abuse and violent silencing of her. However, in answer to Emilia's question, she states equivocally, "Nobody. I myself...Commend me to my kind lord—O, farewell" (5.2.122-23) in her last breath, and I take this as both an implication of her own assertiveness and a disclosure of her purity. This is not to suggest that one should read a deception in Desdemona's words like Iago's, but rather to point to her own integrity and her reliance on the role of Christ to exemplify her steadfastness and faith to her husband despite his sin.

I devote the fourth chapter to Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. In this chapter, it is relevant to engage with the legal document, the *Old Yellow Book*, from which Browning drew inspiration and attempted to show the truth of the case by taking aspects of the document and illuminating the voices of those involved. The *Old Yellow Book* displays the lawyers' rhetorical strategies and documents the events leading up to and involving Guido's murder of Pompilia. Of course, there are similarities between Browning's poem and the original case; however, Browning's choices to characterize Pompilia as good and to implement testimonial rhetoric within her monologue suggest the artist's act of writing a character free from guilt. Browning's final judgment affects the reading of Pompilia's character. But, as has been briefly discussed, this is not an indication of absolute purity. Pompilia's monologue also involves a focus on Caponsacchi and on love, which problematizes her exoneration yet also functions to show her reliance on the religious and spiritual notions of love and community. Pompilia,

like Desdemona, employs martyrological rhetoric and equivocation in her testimony to display her authority.

I also include Guido's monologues (Books V and XI) as parallels to my engagement with Othello's speeches as they offer a way to read Guido's own performance and his attempt to vindicate himself while he is on trial. Dunbar indicates that Guido's rhetoric straddles the line between confession and testimony, and the psychological destruction his monologues exhibit implies his guilt and understanding that point to Pompilia's innocence or at least to his sin. Pompilia's monologue (Book VII) is rife with religious imagery in its emphasis on mercy and forgiveness. Within her monologue one sees glimpses of understanding and application of religious/spiritual authority that go beyond blind faith. Pompilia's speech relies on her testimony of the events, her understanding of her victimhood, and, surprisingly, her forgiveness of Guido. Again, as with Desdemona, this is not a sign of submission to the patriarchal society in which she lives, but rather is an indication of her state of mind as it is invested in the higher power of religious understanding and death.

Although the tendency to read these characters as simply elements in or products of the times in which they were written and, consequentially, if only fictionally, lived, Shakespeare and Browning have both been exalted for their ability to depict universal human truth—and suffering is part of this. Desdemona and Pompilia suffer at the hands of both their culture and their husbands, yet each offers a glimpse into how female authority engages with the transcendent understanding of death and the power of their words: power over the male characters' judgments and accusations; power over how their

literary stories are told and understood; and power over the audience of viewers and/or readers who feel compassion and admiration for them.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

The power Desdemona and Pompilia have is steeped in how they view the world around them and how they interpret their circumstances through a Renaissance Christian lens. In this chapter, I discuss the historical context of Christianity and specifically of Roman Catholicism within both the early modern and Victorian periods of England, highlighting notions of martyrdom, sainthood, and the distinction between confession and testimony. I also introduce my analysis of the roles that Desdemona and Pompilia represent throughout Shakespeare's play and Browning's dramatic monologue. Incorporation of verbal testimony from a feminine perspective is not new, as we will see in the characterization that Shakespeare and Browning provide. However, Carol Gilligan's 1982 study of the female perspective as it relates to moral development illuminates the use of religious rhetoric in *Othello* and *The Ring and the Book*. Gilligan argues for the inclusion of women's stories and perspectives within an arena that historically relied upon male perspective and analysis, and from which women were judged less moral, and I acknowledge an interesting parallel between Gilligan's understanding and what I see in Shakespeare's and Browning's texts: women still have a voice in literature in which male voices predominate.

GILLIGAN'S THEORY AND KANE'S VICTIM SOULS

In *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Gilligan charts three stages of moral development taken from a study of twenty-nine

women's testimonies on their view of a moral dilemma (specifically abortion and the Heinz Dilemma as utilized by Lawrence Kohlberg). Gilligan states, "The sequence of women's moral judgment proceeds from an initial concern with survival to a focus on goodness and finally to a reflective understanding of care as the most adequate guide to the resolution of conflicts in human relationships" (105). From this perspective one might argue that Desdemona and Pompilia are written to adhere to a particular moral code that stems from a female perspective of mutual care and community in contrast to a masculine reliance on justice and individuality. This progression is meaningfully demonstrated in *Othello*, as Desdemona embodies Gilligan's stages of moral development when she reveals her own authority and responsibility, and attempts to help others, through her final testimonies. I discuss this in the third chapter in more detail. In *The Ring and the Book*, Pompilia's progression is shown only in retrospect through her monologue as she retells her life story and the circumstances surrounding her murder. However, her testimony also highlights a significant goal to forgive others and presents her own authority, much like Desdemona's.

In addition to Gilligan's psychological study, Paula M. Kane's discussion of the *Victim Soul* as it pertains to early 20th century religious understanding shows how this concept developed from traditional Roman Catholic notions of suffering as a spiritual duty and gift. Kane defines a *Victim Soul* as a devoted follower of Christ, typically a nun, who takes on personal affliction (illness, physical wounding, and mental *un*-health) in order to alleviate the sufferings of those around her and thereby (perhaps metaphorically) to take on the sin of others.¹ Although Desdemona's and Pompilia's sufferings do not

¹ 1 Peter 2: 21-25

come from a divine source or from self-mutilation, their acceptance of their fates and their final words echo what Kane defines as the act of the *Victim Soul* as she “voluntarily embraces and receives pain. [This] Obedient *submission to* suffering, rather than suffering itself, is the redemptive act, in imitation of Christ’s complete acceptance of God’s will” (83; emphasis added). Desdemona’s and Pompilia’s innocence and deaths appeal to a wider context of salvation and suffering their stories reflect.² Kane goes on to explain that

On one hand, Catholic devotional lore elevated the anguish of victim souls by affirming their cosmic purpose: to redeem the world’s sinfulness through personal suffering. This redemptive role seemingly elevated woman as an alter Christus who claimed masculine and spiritual power like Jesus, the man-God who triumphed over death...On the other hand, since most victim souls were women, the movement seemed to imagine pain as women’s common lot and to express sympathy for their suffering. (115)

The life of the *Victim Soul* was extreme, and even within the Catholic community was seen as problematic in a number of ways; however, this phenomenon descended from a wider understanding of and praise for early-church saints and early modern martyrs. If Desdemona and Pompilia represent aspects of wifhood, martyrdom, and saintliness, their sufferings and forgiveness of their husbands and exoneration of their fellow accused could be taken as invitations for their communities to purge themselves of sin and heal. Desdemona and Pompilia feel the full effect of the corruption of justice—both religious and legal—in their respective societies, and they are the ones who are condemned to embody this corruption, however false the accusations are. Likewise, *Victim Souls* would endure immense physical and psychological suffering for their communities. In line with

² See Kane and Girard.

Gilligan's thesis, the "harm" inflicted upon Desdemona and Pompilia, and the care for others they demonstrate, are necessary for the moral good of their societies. However, in order to align with Gilligan's thesis and be framed within Kane's *Victim Souls*, Desdemona and Pompilia must rise above simply suffering harm. They must eventually adopt responsibility and acquire an outlook of ultimate salvation before they transcend their domestic roles.

It is important to acknowledge that the tendency for suffering and sin is often aligned with femininity and women's bodies. Gilligan, too, identifies the contradiction of the "*feminine* identification of goodness with self-sacrifice" (8; emphasis added) in the second stage of her theory of moral development. Shakespeare and Browning did not adhere to this culturally popular notion and write this outlook into the stories of Desdemona and Pompilia as the two women ultimately sacrifice their selves and their notions of selfhood for the greater good. Rather, I argue that Desdemona's and Pompilia's suffering and consequent reliance on their souls' salvation over physical torment suggest that they ultimately transcend their roles and thus undermine a strictly feminine versus masculine dichotomy. So, why allow them to take on not only their supposed sin but also the sins of others? Desdemona and Pompilia progress to testify their own truths despite the allegations against them. They also offer possible help to the other characters through their testimonies, thereby beginning to heal their societies. As Gilligan asserts, the final stage in a woman's moral development is dependent on

separating the voice of the self from the voices of others, the woman asks if it is possible to be responsible to herself as well as to others and thus to reconcile the disparity between hurt and care....The criterion for judgment thus shifts from goodness to truth when the morality of action is assessed not on the basis of its

appearance in the eyes of others, but in terms of the realities of its intention and consequence. (82-83)

Desdemona and Pompilia judge themselves through their proclamation of innocence and their intent to care for others. They each claim authority to tell their truth through testimony and adhere to their ultimate spiritual redemption.

MARTYRDOM, TESTIMONY, AND CONFESSION

Shakespeare and Browning did not write dogmatically to dramatize a world in which women and men could learn how to act, yet the religiosity embedded in each work reflects the social and religious atmosphere of both early modern and Victorian England. Aspects of political and religious anxiety and doubt are reflected in the play and dramatic monologue as each society comes into conflict with the notion of authority: The idea of selfhood, justice, and duty in *Othello*; the clashing of the judicial law and religious gospel, and the reliance on spiritual salvation over physical torment in *The Ring and the Book*. Queen Elizabeth I's denunciation of Roman Catholicism in early modern England and the reestablishment of the Catholic Hierarchy in Victorian England act as two pivotal moments that frame my discussion of *Othello* and *The Ring and the Book*.

To begin with, the split from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism within the official church under King Henry VIII, Queen Elizabeth I's father, caused even more of a rift between Roman Catholics and Protestants that would reverberate for centuries. Many devout believers on both sides were willing to die for their faith and did. This change also raised questions of authority and the role of the self in salvation and faith. Once doubt of the nature of the priesthood as mouthpieces for and earpieces to God was established, in addition to the debate about the sacrament of communion, people began to emphasize

their individual power in regard to God's grace and divine relationship. After the death of Roman Catholic Queen Mary I, Queen Elizabeth I reestablished Anglicanism as the official religion of England. Furthermore, she was excommunicated in 1570 by Pope Pius V. She became constantly and progressively anxious about treason against her by Roman Catholic subjects and foreign governments, as this act also excommunicated her followers and required remaining Roman Catholics to denounce her as their Queen. Upon her death, King James I ascended the throne. King James I's required *Oath of Allegiance* after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was a direct result of the continuation of the conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics. As stated above, the religious rift continued into Victorian times. The reestablishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1850 renewed the question of the authority of the Anglican Church and Crown. The Church had already split into factions, and this act restored the Roman Catholic loyalty to bishops and the Pope for the first time since Queen Mary I.

I believe that in both *Othello* and *The Ring and the Book*, the judicial and the religious are constantly fused and separated. Early modern martyrs relied upon specific testimonial rhetoric, and the distinction between confession and testimony in a religious and legal sense is a pivotal aspect in my analysis of Desdemona and Pompilia. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* traces the origin of "martyr" to the Greek word for "witness." Furthermore, Ann-Marie Dunbar offers a crucial distinction between the definitions of confession and testimony: "the focus of confession is usually the confessing self and its perceived sin or guilt; in testimony, *witnesses* typically speak of a wrong done to them by others, or of a wrong witnessed" (135; emphasis added).

Dunbar explicitly focuses on these terms as they are applied in a judicial setting.

However, there are similarities between the terms as they are used in a religious setting as well. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines confession as both “(2) The profession of faith made by a martyr or confessor” and “(3) An acknowledgment of sin, made either in general terms by a congregation in the course of liturgical worship, or specifically by an individual penitent in public confession, or more usually in private or auricular confession.” According to Dunbar’s distinction between confession and testimony, testimony may also be understood as akin to the second definition of confession above.

Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines testimony as “Personal or documentary evidence or attestation in support of a fact or statement; hence, any form of evidence or proof.” Furthermore, according to the OED, to testify is “(1) *To bear witness to, or give proof of (a fact); to assert or affirm the truth of (a statement); to attest*” and “(3) *To profess and openly acknowledge (a fact, belief, object of faith or devotion, etc.); to proclaim as something that one knows or believes. Chiefly biblical*” (emphasis added). Testimonial rhetoric, both in a judicial or religious sense, implies an affordance of truth, and to testify necessitates an audience to hear this truth. Furthermore, witnesses of Christ’s suffering and the martyrs’ testimonies seem to exemplify ultimate faith in Christ and, therefore, in salvation, despite wrongs done to them. Desdemona and Pompilia both testify to an audience that hears their words and judges them. Despite Othello’s and Guido’s accusations and subsequent confessions of sin/guilt, (and I chiefly use this religious connotation and Dunbar’s legal definition of confession in this study),

Desdemona's and Pompilia's testimonies allow them to display their authority as they highlight their salvation and witness the whole truth of their circumstances to their respective audiences.

Early modern martyrs, particularly Protestants under Roman Catholic Queen Mary I, frequently relied upon the stories of early church martyrs and saints in order to gain inspiration for and bravery through their formal trials. The pivotal text within the history of martyrdom is John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. Foxe details the stories of the martyred apostles and evangelists, primitive and early Christian martyrs, and Protestant martyrs under Queen Mary I. In *Discourses of Martyrdom in English Literature, 1563-1694*, John R. Knott discusses at length the history and rhetoric of martyrdom in Foxe's work and within other literary works. Although Foxe's examples of martyrs were generally male, the dual aspects of weakness and strength pervade the text. Knott states

It was essential to grasp the paradox that God enables the Christian to prevail through weakness...Christians were taught to see themselves both as heroes, following their captain Christ into battle, and as victims, sheep to be slaughtered. The clash of metaphors forces one to attend to the paradox that one discovers strength through weakness. (29)

Ellen Macek also discusses this notion of the dual traits of weakness and strength within the discourse and history of the beliefs of martyrs. She states:

It is in the context of their final end that the strength of these martyrs' newly discovered autonomy and spiritual maturity becomes fully manifest....Death in defense of their faith was the third and final process in liberation and spiritual maturation. By it, they transcended even their autonomous selves; without losing their personal identity, they became one with a higher transforming power. In freely uniting themselves with the redemptive act of sacrifice and the power Jesus, they participated in what some modern scholars have seen as an essentially androgynous act. (77-78)

Macek goes on to reason that “Foxe's powerful imagery ambiguously associated women's participation in the passive action of martyrdom with the active strength of men in general and Jesus Christ in particular” (79). Although critics have viewed Desdemona and Pompilia as passive at the hands of their murderers, they come to view their physical suffering as less significant since they gain spiritual strength through their faith. Furthermore, their concerns with worldly affairs steadily decline as the play and Pompilia’s dramatic monologue in the poem progress. Desdemona and Pompilia both focus on their salvation from Heaven, and their testimonies contain entreaties for others’ salvation, too.

To emphasize their assertion, Shakespeare and Browning set up the scenes as trials in which Desdemona and Pompilia can testify concerning their circumstances. The juridical procedure (trial) and language is used mostly by the male characters surrounding the accused women. The male characters also employ—through the maidservants Emilia and Margherita—visual “evidence” with which to prove Desdemona’s and Pompilia’s adultery, a stolen handkerchief and forged letters, respectively. Desdemona and Pompilia, in turn, use language that relies on God’s salvation in order to display their agency and power. Desdemona’s and Pompilia’s words are tools they use to uphold their innocence, yet the understanding of their truths relies ultimately on the viewer/reader’s interpretation of these words. Shakespeare and Browning both wrote for an audience of largely Protestant (Anglican) English observers and readers. To be sure, ideas about the “ideal woman” are embedded in the two texts. However, Shakespeare’s and Browning’s ways

of allowing their female characters to express themselves through their testimonies suggest a deliberate attempt to characterize these women as having verbal authority.

The words Desdemona and Pompilia use not only offer audience and reader glimpses of their histories, but their words also demonstrate how both women perceive their fates and reveal whom they rely upon for salvation. Although they are characterized as physically weak, both because of their literal wounds at the hands of their murderer-husbands and because of their gender, their power and strength come from their testimonies. Ultimately, Desdemona and Pompilia *witness* for their accusers their own truth and are given space to do so. While Iago and Guido, and even Othello, have the option or are forced to speak in a traditional judicial court setting, these women are only given their final words on their death beds. Likewise, early modern martyrs were given a formal space in which to testify; however, it is in their final moments at the stake where they show their true authority.

ROMAN CATHOLIC MARTYRS, SAINTS, AND HAGIOGRAPHY

Although there are profound similarities between Desdemona and Pompilia and the Protestant martyrs about whom Foxe wrote, Desdemona and Pompilia both lived in early modern Italy and would have been Roman Catholics. To this end, it is relevant to consider that Iago's and Guido's false accusation of Desdemona and Pompilia, respectively, and Othello's and Guido's consequent judgment and murder, mirror the plights of the Roman Catholic martyrs under Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. In *The English Martyr from Reformation to Revolution*, Alice Dailey states that under an excommunicated Elizabeth I and an anxious James I, the treason trial "restructures the

relationship between victim and persecutor into a conflict between the would-be martyr and his or her own sovereign ...In place of the legible performance of sacred typology initiated by the heresy trial, the treason trial produced a story of a secular criminal— a traitor” (101). The Roman Catholic defendants had stealthily to navigate the accusation of traitor in order to be legitimately viewed as martyrs. One way they did this was by using equivocation during their testimonies.

Dailey discusses Henry Garnet’s *Treatise of Equivocation* and highlights the fact that “equivocation is necessary not just to protect oneself or the Catholic cause but *to avoid bringing harm to others*. Yes, God expressly issued a commandment against lying. But...an individual’s behavior must accordingly be dictated by a larger structure of moral living” (181; emphasis added). Desdemona’s final words: “Nobody [has done this]. I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord—O, Farewell!” (5.2.122-123) and Pompilia’s frequent ambiguity that qualifies her final words “God stooping shows sufficient of His light / For us i’ the dark to rise by. And I rise” (7.1844-45) are not lies, but perhaps equivocations—revealing their own perspectives and mental reservation of the truth. Dailey asserts, “No real parameters are described [In Garnet’s *Treatise*]: priests and lay Catholics are left to determine for themselves when they are being questioned unjustly and are bound to equivocate versus when the examination is just and equivocation forbidden” (181). Both women are asked to testify about the circumstances involved in their murders, and although I do not consider Emilia in Desdemona’s case and the friar in Pompilia’s to be questioning these women unjustly or on behalf of their

murderers, both women must navigate how to detail their plights in a way that benefits themselves and their societies.

The early modern martyrs under both Mary I and Elizabeth I faced criticism and accusations of heresy and treason for their beliefs against Protestantism and Catholicism. In Victorian England, it was the Bible and its words that came under scrutiny, in large part due to the German Higher Criticism introduced from the continent. This new hermeneutical style involved interpreting the Bible as an historical record instead of a spiritual text. In *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, Charles LaPorte discusses this phenomenon in relation to the poetry generated at this time. Browning's poem was no exception. The hermeneutical tradition was thrown on its head as progresses in science and technology came to fruition. LaPorte states that "the higher criticism presented the revolutionary practice of studying the Christian scriptures as the collected poetry and mythology of an ancient, primitive people— as a mythical, rather than a strictly factual, record" (7). For his part, Browning infused the notion of fact and poetry within *The Ring and the Book*, and LaPorte identifies much hagiographic imagery and classical allusion in the poem to argue this point. However, LaPorte sees this most substantially in the way in which Pompilia is characterized. He states that

most Victorian reviewers found the poem's weightiest hagiography in [Pompilia]—an extraordinary study in the mold of a virgin martyrdom...never fully compatible with the poem's competing hagiographies, this virgin martyr narrative deserves special consideration for the neatness with which it serves as a synecdoche for higher critical issues in *The Ring and the Book*. (162-163)

Browning employed virgin-martyr hagiography to characterize Pompilia as saintly and pure, thereby fusing religious "art" and history for the purpose of reviving the "real"

Pompilia. LaPorte sees as Browning's inspiration Anna Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art: Containing the Patron Saints, the Martyrs, the Early Bishops, the Hermits, and the Warrior Saints of Christendom, as Represented in the Fine Arts*. Pompilia's characterization is, according to LaPorte, influenced by Browning's understanding and appropriation of Roman Catholic sainthood. Pompilia's awareness and rhetorical strategy will be highlighted in a later chapter. However, the religious influences that informed Browning's rendering of Pompilia's story are adapted from the original court documents in the *Old Yellow Book*. Browning greatly altered the story in order to characterize Pompilia, as Desdemona also is characterized, as an innocent, caring, and chaste woman.

Desdemona and Pompilia exemplify the progression of morality that Gilligan highlights in her own study, and they ultimately rely more on their souls' salvation in a religious context than on adherence to their duty as chaste wives. As Gilligan asserts, "It is precisely this dilemma—the conflict between compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power—which the feminine voice struggles to resolve in its effort to reclaim the self and to solve the moral problem in such a way that *no one is hurt*" (71; emphasis added). Desdemona and Pompilia eventually speak their truth—and employ equivocation—for the perceived good of all. Desdemona's and Pompilia's testimonial rhetoric places responsibility on themselves as the characters who are able to help others understand the scope of the circumstances. Without their final words, their stories are told only through the accusations and confessions of their murderers, the accomplices, the fellow-accused, and those who judge. Without their final words, Desdemona and

Pompilia would remain simply victims, having no agency to testify verbally to their faith and circumstances before they can transcend their domestic roles.

FEMININITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

As stated earlier, Shakespeare and Browning wrote for audiences that understood Desdemona and Pompilia as women under the authority of men. In *Othello*, we see a shift in Desdemona's words as Iago's plan takes hold of Othello. At first, Desdemona seems to be outspoken and self-assured as she leaves the Venetian court and follows her husband to Cyprus. Further along, not only does Shakespeare allot her fewer lines in the play, but the words Desdemona uses increasingly focus on her own virtue/innocence, her appeal for mercy, and, finally, on her call for spiritual salvation and authority over her story. In *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720*, Patricia Crawford asserts:

Women were generally assumed to be inferior to men, and religious ideology reinforced such beliefs. Nevertheless...women could both accept beliefs about their inferiority and transcend them. They were neither passive nor oppressed victims, but rather human agents, making their history within a social structure which was not of their making. (1)

In Desdemona's case, relinquishing her role of daughter to assume the role of wife to Othello is controversial not only for the Venetian society she lives in, but also especially for her father. Iago plays on this conflict in order to generate hatred toward Othello. Yet, we see Desdemona's tendency to adhere strictly to her standard of her perfect role as wife up to the last acts of the play. She relies on religious ideals and proves even more to rely on a spiritual role as the conflict progresses and her relationship begins to break down. Sarah Covington states that "if the torture and execution of martyrs displayed their exemplary fortitude, it was the trial or interrogation scene that reflected an equally potent

moment when the faithful were challenged, only to seize a higher power and turn the proceedings to their own advantage” (135). Desdemona’s innocent death at the hands of Othello suggests martyrdom in return for her faithful obedience as his wife. Her words do not so much condemn Othello as they rely on her unwavering innocence and view to the afterlife. Covington further emphasizes that “The scriptural resonances that underlay the idea of witness—and, relatedly, testimony—were constantly utilised in the early modern period by defendants who presented themselves in letters and speeches as holding fast for the faith” (138) and Desdemona, along with Emilia, proclaims Desdemona’s innocence and faith throughout the play.

Pompilia’s monologue in *The Ring and the Book* is likewise rife with appeals to her innocence. She, too, must relinquish her role as daughter and act to adhere to the role of wife to Guido, that is, up until his abuse of her and her subsequent flight. Pompilia evinces an even greater push against the societal structure as she begins to rely on her spiritually ordained role as mother, her spiritual bond with Caponsacchi, and on her soul’s salvation. Pompilia, like Desdemona, reclaims her story through her monologue. However, Browning allows Pompilia more license to speak her truth, partly because of his use of the dramatic monologue mode. Barbara Welter emphasizes that “Religion or piety was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength... Religion belonged to woman by divine right, a gift of God and nature” (152). However, she also argues that “Man might, in fact, ask no more than this in woman, but she was beginning to ask more of herself, and in the asking was threatening the third powerful and necessary virtue, submission....Submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women”

(157). Pompilia's actions display a departure from this submissive role, as she flees Guido and Arezzo and attempts to save herself and her unborn child. She relinquishes this submissive role and claims the authority of the divine, thus adhering ultimately to her beliefs in the face of a worldly foe, as the martyrs also claimed to do and as Welter implies in her article.

This question of obedience to the husband is a pivotal source of Desdemona's and Pompilia's accusers' manipulations and arguments. If these women are accused of adultery, it is their seeming disobedience to their husbands, alongside the physical "evidence," that fuels the accusations and allots credibility to Iago's and Guido's stories. However, as stated above, it is through their speeches, not their actions, that Desdemona and Pompilia exonerate themselves and reveal truth. They transcend the role of dutiful wife to a husband by relying on their belief in salvation and maintaining their purity in the eyes of God. As Crawford explains, "The true church was discussed through the metaphor of human marriage as 'the bride of Christ.' Preachers amplified the concept in their sermons. Just as the bride, ideally, was to be chaste and pure, decked out for one alone, so too the church was to remain pure for Christ" (13). Since marriage was metaphorically used to describe the relationship between God and the church, then the microcosm manifested in the society and relationships in which Desdemona and Pompilia were engaged is all the more shaken by the accusations against them. The accusations of Desdemona and Pompilia as whores to their husbands has metaphoric weight. One can read Othello and Guido as accusers aligned with an oppressive government or head of

church. The women's plights mirror those of the martyrs accused of being traitors to their rulers or heretics to God and the established church.

As Knott asserts:

The perceived severity of the threat to the health of the body of the church demanded violent means of purgation. Burning for heresy offered a formal, legitimized method of eliminating pollution from the church. Because the church could not assume responsibility for the execution itself, the condemned heretic was turned over to the secular arm for punishment. The sheriff managed the business of death. Yet...the church could assert its presence by means of a sermon at the stake. (79)

Although Othello and Guido take it upon themselves to murder their wives, Desdemona's and Pompilia's testimonies, in contrast to Iago's and Guido's false accusations, ultimately, I would argue, "out-tongue [their] complaints" (*Othello*, 1.2.19).

Desdemona's and Pompilia's wording of their testimonies makes their innocence and goodness understood as essential to their characters. Both Iago and Guido frame the women as perpetrators and consequently as sacrifices for societal ills. However, they are ultimately thwarted by the women's testimonies and their reliance on salvation their words and beliefs demonstrate.

Roman Catholic religious ideology provided pivotal impetus for religious questioning and change in both in Shakespeare's and Browning's times, and the question of Desdemona's and Pompilia's faithfulness is fundamental to the plot of the texts and to the larger society into which these women are written. Dailey states that during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, "instead of being assigned an identity defined by faith, the condemned Catholic subject is assigned an identity defined by political allegiance" (109). She goes on to emphasize that "As the most vocal proponents of the doctrine [of

equivocation], Jesuits in particular were maligned by the skillfully managed government propaganda that posited them as lying traitors with no claim to political innocence, let alone martyrdom" (165). Desdemona's and Pompilia's presumed transgressions come not from any proven physical act of adultery, but from the act of, in Desdemona's case, disobedience as told and manipulated by Iago and as her words become twisted in Othello's view; in Pompilia's case, because of her fleeing from and testimony about Guido's abuse in order to fulfill the higher role of mother and preserve her life. Desdemona's and Pompilia's fates are significantly and ultimately aligned with what Knott identifies as the martyrs' "powerful conviction that dying for one's faith was a fructifying act, a means of renewing the life of the church" (37). Ultimately, both women come to view their physical lives as having less worth than their spiritual salvation as they increasingly rely on testifying their faith. However, the key to their characterization lies in both the promise of their spiritual transcendence through faith and their acknowledgment and help of the people they leave behind. Knott asserts that "Foxe's Reformation martyrs demonstrate the purity of their faith and reject the appeals of the world, including those of family.... Yet these martyrs are shown to be more closely connected to a sustaining human community, and more fully human themselves" (45-46). Desdemona and Pompilia both attempt to ensure, however well their plans go, that their loved ones are safe and exonerated from guilt all the while proclaiming their own authority and solidifying their truths in the face of death. Their testimonies become the binding force with which they can profess their faith, rise from their physical deaths, and catalyze healing within their communities. A close analysis of Desdemona's and

Pompilia's speeches as testimonies displays their faithfulness, their emphasis on care and community, and, ultimately, their authority and transcendence.

CHAPTER THREE: DESDEMONA IN *OTHELLO*

William Shakespeare's *Othello* was written and performed during the first years of King James' I reign (1603/1604), but the reverberations of Elizabeth I's excommunication, alongside other occurrences of anti-Catholic sentiment, affected the ways in which Shakespeare constructed his characters. Shakespeare granted to Desdemona characteristics of piety, chastity, and goodness. Her power comes through the religious rhetoric in her testimony in the final act of the play, and the use of equivocation in her last moment echoes that of the Roman Catholic martyrs under Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. Clifford Ronan (2002) and Regina M. Schwartz (2005) both argue for the religious allegory within *Othello*, as the tragic genre came to represent aspects of Roman Catholicism, specifically the Mass and transubstantiation of the eucharist, that felt the force of changes within the church. Both also align Desdemona with the figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary by way of religious allusion and characterization from the characters' speeches.

In this chapter, I engage scholars such as Eamon Grennan, Sarah Munson Deats, Michael Slater, Ronan, and Schwartz, in conjunction with moral development psychologist Carol Gilligan, to highlight the moments where Desdemona's speeches show a progression from dutiful wife to authoritative believer. I also contrast Desdemona's testimonies with moments in Othello's speeches to show the different perspectives of justice at work in the play. I argue that in *Othello*, one sees a distinction between the secular trial of the first act in which Desdemona plays a part, to the heavy

reliance on spiritual salvation as the setting moves to Cyprus and Desdemona is caught between two loyalties again. *Othello* presents a microcosm of a society struggling between secular and religious notions of authority, justice, and faithfulness. Eamon Grennan argues that “Although it has no power in Othello’s world, [Desdemona’s] earnest, plain, and generous speech must serve as the moral measure necessary to any comprehensive understanding of the experience of the play” (288). Although I do agree that Desdemona’s speeches point toward a different perspective on morality, as discussed in the previous chapter, Desdemona’s conflicting need to protect Othello and, progressively, herself throughout the play indicates a tension between her domestic role and her increasing agency. Desdemona reveals this agency through the testimony of her truth and faith in the final acts of the play as she ultimately relies on her spiritual salvation.

In the first act of the play, the community of *Othello* is generally sustained and the major conflict at this point is the war against the Turks. Shakespeare characterizes Othello as principally involved in his political role. Even as his elopement with Desdemona is discovered, the Venetian Senate’s main concern is the war. None of the male characters concede to the notion of marriage as the highest form of duty. Throughout the play, Othello is acknowledged as an outstanding general, constantly bombarded by affairs of the state and war, and he himself professes a lack of marital understanding and eloquence of speech in the beginning. Instead, he relies on his martial prowess, and perhaps it is this lack of knowledge on his part regarding relationships that catalyzes his misunderstanding and deception by Iago. Upon hearing from Iago that

Brabantio has attacked his reputation, Othello notes, “My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue [Brabantio’s] complaints” (1.2.18-19). Here, Othello relies on his merit as a soldier and his loyalty to the Venetian government to “out-tongue,” that is, give louder voice to his story and reputation, against anything Brabantio can say against him. The notion of legitimacy is paramount to Othello’s status as a general for the Venetian army, and his speech highlights the fact that he is reliant on his past actions and the mutual “wooing” that he and Desdemona shared in their courtship. The last of this monologue likewise reveals how Othello views himself:

For know, Iago
But that I love the gentle Desdemona
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea’s worth. (1.2.24-28; emphasis added)

His confidence in his accomplishments as a general, and his “unhoused free” temperament, are quelled by his new role as husband. He will “confine” his bachelor-like personality only because he loves Desdemona. However, it is clear that his sense of self is unchanged. Later, he admits his own lack of eloquence, harkening back to the Old Testament leader, Moses.³ Moses needed God and his brother, Aaron, both to rule his speech and to speak for him. Significantly, Moses is also the deliverer of Old Testament Law. Othello begins to relate, “Rude am I in my speech / And little blest with the soft phrase of peace... / And therefore little shall I grace my cause / In speaking for myself”

³ Ex. 4:10

(1.3.82-83; 89-90). The diction of “rude,” “little blest,” “peace,” and “grace” suggests gifts from God, of which Othello is not in possession. Interestingly, it was through Othello’s own storytelling that Desdemona sympathized and fell in love with him. Yet, as we will see, he calls upon her to speak for them.

Later in the scene, Othello begins to tell the Senate just how he and Desdemona fell in love to defend himself against Brabantio’s accusations. He states, “I do *confess* the vices of my blood / So justly to your grave ears I’ll present / How I did thrive in this fair lady’s love / And she in mine” (1.3.125-128, emphasis added). Although Othello’s main goal is to detail the mutuality within their relationship, the word choice of “confess” and “vices” in the first line suggests faults in character or circumstance as opposed to the merits gained through services that Othello has done for the Venetian state. The faults of his wooing and elopement must be justified to the Senate, and the one person who can do this is Desdemona. Sarah Munson Deats asserts that “although striving for mutuality, the consensual companionate marriage denied equality. Thus, the dominance of the husband over the wife, ratified in St. Paul’s dictum that the husband should be head of the wife as Christ was head of the church, was axiomatic” (234). Othello’s newformed role of husband significantly alters and adds to his duty as a leader. He now must consider the effect of his leadership in a domestic sense, as well as its implications in a spiritual sense. As Deats alerts us, Desdemona’s role is still submissive, yet integral to the notion of right and wrong in regard to the Venetian Senate. Clifford Ronan asserts that “For Othello, an alien who never lived long in civilian Venetian society, the role of the Judeo-Christian

husband is an especially challenging one” (275). Even this early in the play Othello needs Desdemona’s testimony to justify his actions.

Once summoned to “witness” before the Senate, and “confess” whether or not she had a hand in the courtship, Desdemona asserts herself in relation, and submission, to the patriarchal society in which she lives. It is Desdemona’s first testimony—not confession—to the Venetian Senate where she tells her father that the love she has for Othello proves that their marriage is genuine, yet her testimony depends on the fact that she acts within societal norms:⁴

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 hitherto 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)

⁴ In “Morality, Ethics, and Failed Love in *Othello*,” John Gronbeck-Tedesco states, “The Senate abides by the rules of the space it inhabits. The Duke seeks evidence in the form of testimony from the alleged victim. The case turns not on the appeal of a father who has lost his daughter, but on the issue of love. When Desdemona professes her love for Othello in the lucid terms of the ‘duty’ she now owes to the man who is her husband, the case against Othello comes to an abrupt end” (260).

Gilligan explains that, during the initial stage of a woman's moral development, when "women feel excluded from direct participation in society, they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose names they are known" (67). Although Desdemona is anything but excluded from participating, she must participate on the terms given to her by the Senate. Thus, she must appeal to this judgment from a male perspective. She exposes the importance of education and understanding that she has learned from both of her parents—education to respect her father, and education to respect her husband once she marries, as her mother did. The insistence on duty is doubly significant in that it shows a shift in her reliance on authority. In the first part of her speech, she exposes the nature of her duty to her father. As the Law of the Old Testament serves as a tool to guide correct actions for believers, Desdemona has been educated about the proper way to "respect" her father. In the second half of the speech, her duty moves to that of her husband. Here, she shifts perspectives from an Old Testament duty of Law to a New Testament duty of Gospel.⁵

Desdemona's characterization is also dictated by her role as a lady in court. As Michael Slater asserts:

When critics note that Desdemona's speech before the court, particularly her frank assessment of her own involvement in the marriage and her request to accompany Othello to Cyprus, brazenly challenges the patriarchal norms of her culture, they ultimately overlook the importance of social rank. Speaking in such a context may have been deemed inappropriate for some women, but for a court lady it was expected...not once enjoined to silence, her speech does not appear to threaten the patriarchal order of the play. (224)

⁵ Matt. 19:4-6

At this moment, then, the question of the moral dilemma, if there is one, is not a question of harm or care, but is rather vested in the judgment of honor and duty as defined by the Venetian Senate. Deats argues that “from the beginning of the play, Desdemona accepts her subordinate role in society and defines herself in relation to men, as either a wife or daughter, but not as an independent individual” (244). This is clear in the first act.

However, I argue that Desdemona’s senses of self and authority alter, as we shall see. Her initial duty to her society relies on that society’s ability to function. Once this society breaks down, Desdemona’s roles of wife and daughter cannot be upheld and thus she must undergo a change—if not to save her body, then to save her soul.

Once absolved of any folly assumed by their elopement, Desdemona and Othello begin to argue for their staying together as Othello is assigned in Cyprus. It is Desdemona’s argument for her leaving Venice that first persuades the Duke to allow her to go. In this speech, one of her lengthiest, she indicates again the notion of her submission to Othello, and seems to allude to herself as a follower of Christ against the battle of good and evil:

That I did love the Moor to live with him

.....

I saw Othello’s visage in his mind

And to his honours and his valiant parts

Did I my *soul* and *fortunes* consecrate,

So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,

A moth of peace, and he go to the war,

The rites for which I love him are bereft of me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.

(1.3.249; 253-260; emphasis added)

Deats states that “Othello becomes for Desdemona not only her dearest friend but also an extension of her being; thus, she totally commits herself to her husband and submerges her identity in his” (244), and I further believe that Desdemona appeals to the identity of Othello’s Pauline-defined husband role.⁶ She speaks to the Senate in iambic pentameter which suggests that she views this as a formal trial and is responding to characters that require respect. She employs specific religious diction to demonstrate that, like a disciple of Christ, Desdemona must leave her home and follow her husband. She calls upon her “soul” and “fortunes”⁷ as those aspects which she has given over to Othello because of his deeds and accomplishments. If she is “left behind,” she cannot be by Othello’s side to witness—or even to aid in—his victory. As if to say that in being apart from Othello, she would be in purgatory (“heavy interim”), she pleads to accompany Othello to Cyprus. Perhaps, as her argument implies, she would otherwise be without the knowledge of his military prowess or must wait for his return to hear about his actions; she would also be denied her religious and ceremonial “rites” as a wife. As the disciples and early martyrs knew Christ, she already knows Othello’s ability for glory, and it is her duty to follow him. However, as the characters move to Cyprus and Iago weaves his scheme,

⁶ Eph. 5: 22-24 and Eph. 5: 31

⁷ Matt. 6:19-21

Desdemona's understanding and her role come into question both for herself and for those around her. Her sense of displacement solidifies before she takes control of her story and eventually transcends her role.

In Cyprus, ethical and moral questions of the play, and the justice surrounding them, come to fruition. The issue of justice becomes a major point in the play for all the characters, yet this justice is corrupted as Othello's sense of his leadership—both as a general and as a husband—steadily declines. The ways in which Othello and Cassio react to the situation in the third scene of the second act detail their separate perceptions of justice and duty. By compelling Cassio to drink and consequently to react to Roderigo's attack and to stab Montano, a high-ranking official in Cyprus, Iago sets him up to be characterized as a perpetual drunk. Othello, acting on his military sense of justice as it applies to the state, says:

Now, by heaven

My blood begins my safer guides to rule

And passion, having my best judgement collid,

Assays to lead the way.

.....

Give me to know

How this foul rout began, who set it on,

And he that is approved of this offence,

Though he be twinned with me, both at birth,

Shall lose me. (2.3.200-203; 205-209)

The fact that his “blood” and “passion” have taken over his reason allows us to reflect on Othello’s temperament. The personification of “blood” ruling his “safer guides” and “passion” “coll[y]ing” his “judgment” forebodes Othello’s lack of restraint when facing conflict and his inability to control his reason when confronted with a moment of emotional import. This serves him well, to be sure, in the role of public leader or on the battlefield, and therefore Othello’s anger is neither misdirected nor inappropriate here. His reliance on Iago’s details, and Cassio’s own guilt and shame at his actions as seen later, suggest that Othello should not be judged by his passion/emotions alone, but by his response. Cassio’s and Othello’s relative emotions are not the problem in this scene. Rather, it is Cassio’s rash action of wounding Montano, and Othello’s noble action of demoting Cassio, that are blamed and praised. Othello’s action is noble because by demoting Cassio, his friend, someone who might be as close to him as a twin, he personally aches yet sees this as an act of service to the army and an example of the consequences when one behaves badly. Cassio, concerned with “reputation” and legacy, mourns his licentious and pleasure-seeking actions and is easily persuaded by Iago to appeal to Desdemona for help.

In the third act of the play, Desdemona begins to appeal to Othello for Cassio’s reinstatement, and her perception of the situation is vastly different from Othello’s. She extols Cassio’s virtues and his honorable loyalty to Othello: “For if he be not one that truly loves you, / That errs in ignorance and not in cunning, / I have no judgement in an honest face. / I prithee, call him back” (47-50). Desdemona uses negative diction in order to reinforce Cassio’s respect for Othello and argues that Cassio acted out of ignorance,

not precalculated malice. She also testifies to her own goodness in judging people.

Desdemona does not appeal to judgment based on military orders or political affairs. She focuses on the specific man in question and her own more intuitive influence in the matter. Upholding relationships and helping her fellow believer are more important to her than military rules and reputation.⁸ Upon Othello's denial of Desdemona's request for a speedy conference, she insists:

Why, this is not a boon
'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,
Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit
To your own person. (3.3.76-80)

Desdemona's break from iambic pentameter here shows that she perceives that she is no longer responding or testifying in a formal setting. She still accepts Othello as her husband to obey; however, Desdemona may view this as an opportunity to demonstrate her own goodness. Desdemona does not argue for Othello to do a favor (boon) for her. She instead enforces the fact that by forgiving Cassio and reinstating him, Othello also benefits. In this instance, Desdemona here reflects a women's perspective in Gilligan's second stage of moral development. Gilligan argues that in this stage, "The elaboration of this concept of responsibility and its fusion with a maternal morality that seeks to ensure care for the dependent and unequal characterizes the second perspective. At this point, the good is equated with caring for others"(74) and at this point in the play,

⁸ James 5:19-20

Desdemona's adherence to caring for both Cassio and Othello fuels her argument. Importantly here, Desdemona is still viewed as a dutiful wife despite Iago's initial promptings. Gilligan states, "In this sequence [of moral development], the fact of interconnection informs the central, recurring recognition that just as the incidence of violence is in the end destructive to all, so the activity of care enhances both others and self" (74). Desdemona does not ignore Cassio's wrongdoing. However, her focus on the good of the interconnected, the relational, and the personal contrasts with Othello's enforcing of strict justice. Gilligan argues:

Whereas from the first perspective, morality is a matter of sanctions imposed by a society of which one is more subject than citizen, from the second perspective, moral judgment relies on shared norms and expectations. The woman at this point validates her claim to social membership through the adoption of societal values. Consensual judgment about goodness becomes the overriding concern as survival is now seen to depend on acceptance by others. (79)

In this scene, Desdemona appeals to her own understanding of Cassio's relationship to Othello, yet her understanding follows societal cues of loyalty and praise and is, at this point, still deemed innocent and good. Desdemona also states "he hath left part of his grief with me / To suffer with him" (3.3.53-54). She relies on her ability to comprehend Cassio's plight in order to move Othello, thus inserting herself within the moral question for the good of both men.

Desdemona's good intention is soon manipulated by Iago's insistence that Cassio's and Desdemona's relationship is more intimate than is morally, ethically, and spiritually right. As Iago's influence begins to take hold, Othello's suspicion is all the more evident in his treatment of Desdemona, and he begins to view her appeals for Cassio as verbal evidence of disloyalty and infidelity. It is this accusation of adultery—

treason—that causes the main rift in the society. It is not enough, however, for Iago to ignite the suspicion. Othello, relying still on a sense of justice and holding to the belief in Desdemona's purity, demands "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, / Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof" (3.3.362-363) and "Give me a living reason she's disloyal" (3.3.412). In this act, Othello's anger influences his reason even more. Wherein the second act, his anger toward Cassio was deemed reasonable given the public and military circumstance, here, because the moral dilemma involves the loyalty of his wife, Othello's understanding is faulty. He still needs proof to inform his decision. However, unlike in the prior scene, verbal proof will not suffice. This "ocular proof" is generated by a circumstance in which Emilia, Desdemona's maid and friend and Iago's wife, takes Desdemona's handkerchief and gives it to Iago. Although Emilia does this out of loyalty to her husband and a need for approval with no malicious intent, her sin—theft—causes more destruction. Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room and plants the fact of its missing in Othello's mind. It is the loss of this handkerchief—this relic of love, this magical object, this white (purity) and red (blood) cloth (Veronica's Veil perhaps)—that Othello emphasizes when Desdemona and he are once again together to speak.

In this scene, Desdemona's understanding of herself and her relationship begins to change. Othello's insistence of the whereabouts of the handkerchief is, to Desdemona, initially a method to distract from her appealing for Cassio. Othello's outburst is noted as a quality that he does not usually display: "My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him / Were he in favor as in humour altered" (3.4.125-126). Desdemona's insistence on Othello's alteration in spirit/bodily makeup is likened to a change in physical appearance,

and this is the first instance that Desdemona denies Othello as her lord. As in the prior scene, she bases her judgment on her ability to understand and know people. One can see a transition in her understanding in the following monologue. She goes on to surmise:

Something sure of state
Either from Venice, or some unhatched practice
Made demonstrable here in Cyprus to him,
Hath puddled his clear spirit, and in such cases
Men's natures wrangle with inferior things
Though great ones are their object.
.....
Beshrew me much, Emilia,
I was, unhandsome warrior as I am,
Arraigning [Othello's] unkindness with my soul,
But now I find I had suborned the witness
And he's indicted falsely. (3.4.141-146; 151-155)

Desdemona's conception of Othello's anger is based upon her knowledge of his relation to the state and upon her innocent intentions. She justifies his actions by claiming that his "clear spirit" has been contaminated by thoughts of affairs of state and war, and that naturally, like any man in this situation, he needs someone against whom to lash out. However, in the second half of this speech, she begins to testify in iambic pentameter and to use judicial rhetoric. Both suggest that she considers herself as once again formally judged. Her testimony borders on confession as she grapples with her misunderstanding,

perhaps in an attempt also to empathize with him. However, she must construct her testimony in a way that both upholds her innocence and protects herself and Othello. She identifies herself as an “unhandsome warrior,” that is, one who is uneducated in the arts of war. This identification also functions as an innocent excuse for her perceived wrong “arraign[ment]” (accusation) of Othello’s “unkindness” (both as treating her badly but also perhaps implying that Othello is not “kind” or like himself), because she is unfamiliar with his display of anger. She claims that in her ignorance, she has both “suborned” (corrupted) her own testimony as a “witness” and thus Othello has been “indicted” (charged) incorrectly. However, her use of “soul” indicates that her arraignment of Othello was private, to herself. She does not confess to be the root cause of his anger. Instead, she maintains that his anger stems from matters of war and that she should not have provoked it.

Desdemona’s perceptions of Othello’s displaced anger, her naïveté, and her own need to protect him echo what Gilligan identifies as another moment in which a woman begins to transition to the second stage of her moral development. Gilligan states, “when only others are legitimized as the recipients of the woman's care, the exclusion of herself gives rise to problems in relationships, creating a disequilibrium that initiates the second transition” (74). Upon viewing her moral act of helping aid Cassio’s reinstatement as the instance that incites Othello’s anger, Desdemona begins to understand herself as a recipient of unasked-for wrath. She also begins to grapple with her surfacing agency and simultaneous need to care for Othello. Gilligan goes on to state, “The equation of conformity with care, in its conventional definition, and the illogic of the inequality

between other and self, lead to a reconsideration of relationships in an effort to sort out the confusion between self-sacrifice and care inherent in the conventions of feminine goodness” (74). Emilia, arguably both a witness and prosecutor in this scene, asks whether Desdemona believes Othello’s anger truly developed from matters of state, or, as Emilia implies, from jealousy. Desdemona testifies, “Alas the day, I never gave him cause” (3.4.158). Her understanding of her own innocence and intention renders the notion of Othello’s jealousy unfathomable. Desdemona views herself as a “witness” who is still being *wrongly* persecuted for her own attempt to help Cassio and consequently, to help Othello, too.

In the following act, Iago stages a meeting with Cassio. Iago has manipulated the conversation enough so that Othello, hiding in the shadows, overhears what he believes to be a conversation about Desdemona. This, coupled with the fact the stolen handkerchief is now presented, solidifies Othello’s belief in Desdemona’s adultery with Cassio. Initially, Othello begs, “Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I’ll / not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty / unprovide my mind again” (4.1.201-203). Othello’s insistence on the way in which his reason can be corrupted echoes his awareness of his anger in the second act. However, because of his corrupted understanding, he views gentleness and compassion generated by the sight of Desdemona as aspects that negatively affect his judgment, rather than aspects that simply must be ignored. Iago suggests Othello rather strangle Desdemona in the bed “she hath contaminated” (4.1.205). Not only does this entail an ultimate silencing of Desdemona, (Grennan, 290) but, to Othello “the justice of it pleases” (4.1.206). Again, Othello is

concerned more with right judgment and justice than with relationship. Deats argues that “exceeding the masculine power granted in even the most patriarchal of matrimonial models, [Othello] unquestioningly affirms his prerogative not only to chastise, but even to execute his wife, and he never questions his right to kill her if she is unchaste, sanctifying her murder as a sacrifice” (246). Othello’s perspective of his sense of self as steadfast leader has been compromised. This sense of justice necessitates someone to punish. More than that, because he feels personally—domestically—wronged, his sense of justice also proclaims someone needs to fear for their life and die.

Othello’s treatment of Desdemona in this act, and her reaction to this treatment, reveal her self-assertion, and it is in the final acts of the play where her testimonies significantly reflect those of early modern martyrs as discussed above. Othello melds public and private, justice and relationship, at the very moment he slaps Desdemona in court. Desdemona’s testimony of “I have not deserved this” (4.1.240) and her subsequent removal of herself after “I will not stay to offend you” (4.1.247), reveal that she is both professing her innocence and yet appealing to his request with obedience. In the next scene, as Othello continues to question her fidelity, Desdemona begins to rely on her faith and innocence. Grennan argues that Desdemona holds the:

assumption of the necessary equality between her and her husband, as well as an assumption that when they speak to one another their discourse will be marked by mutual comprehension, that they will also be equal as listeners. From this point it is possible, I think, to mark the decline of the tragic action, and to measure it in terms of the loss of comprehension between the two, a loss chiefly wrought by his refusal to hear her, his refusal to allow her speech to have any free, dependable being in their world. (286)

However, I believe it is not Othello's neglect to hear Desdemona, but rather his misunderstanding of justice and morality that causes his inability to reinforce himself as a husband *and* general, as a religious and secular leader. After Othello blatantly accuses her of falsehood, Desdemona's words shift from obedience to her husband to emphasis on salvation from heaven. In this scene, Desdemona, along with Emilia, proclaims her guiltlessness and faith throughout. When Emilia asks what has angered Othello, "my lord," Desdemona replies "I have [no lord]" before defensively, perhaps even sarcastically, stating to herself, "'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet. / How have I been behaved that he might stick / The small'st opinion on my greatest misuse?" (4.2.105; 110-112). Her second denial of Othello as her lord underscores the rift within their relationship in the previous scenes. Desdemona sees herself as wrongfully treated, and she begins to view Othello, not as a sovereign with power over her, but as a fellow Christian who is wrongfully acting toward her.

Deats argues that Othello "persuades himself that the execution of his unfaithful wife is an act of proper governance necessary to maintaining the peace within the microcosmic commonwealth under his rule" (248). Othello, like a monarch, views Desdemona's infidelity as an act of treason. Answering Othello, Desdemona testifies that she is "Your wife, my lord: your true and loyal wife....Heaven doth truly know it" (4.3.35; 39). As Othello's accusations against her are realized, Desdemona begins to call upon religious authority through the use of metonymy—Heaven stands for God—to prove her innocence and authority. As Gilligan asserts, "conflict arises specifically over the issue of hurting. When no option exists that can be construed as being in the best

interest of everybody, when responsibilities conflict and decision entail the sacrifice of somebody's needs, then the woman confronts the seemingly impossible task of choosing the victim" (80). The choosing of the victim is seen in the shifting pronoun use in Desdemona's sentences. The implication is that there is a breakdown of her understanding of her relationship with Othello. Desdemona continues, "By heaven, *you* do *me* wrong" (4.3.82; emphasis added). Here, she names herself as the victim and Othello the perpetrator opposite Othello's view of himself as the victim and Desdemona as the offender. She professes, "No as I am a Christian. / If to preserve this vessel for my lord / From any hated foul unlawful touch / Be not to be a strumpet, I am none....No, as *I* shall be saved" (4.3.84-87; 88). Here, she signals through her argument of innocence that it is she alone who will be saved. However, in her apostrophe "O heaven, forgive *us!*" (4.3.90; emphasis added) it is clear that she has incorporated the role of victim to offer forgiveness not for just herself, but for the community, specifically her husband. The act ends with her prayer, "God me such usage send / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (4.3.103-104). This signifies that she has adopted the plan to act ("usage") for the good; to incorporate what she knows of evil and use it for good, and this power comes from God.⁹

In the final act of the play, as Othello contemplates Desdemona's murder, he reasons, "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men / Put out the light, and then put out the light!" (5.3.6-7), offering another instance as to how he views Desdemona and people in general. As Cassio was painted as a drunk for drinking, Desdemona is viewed

⁹ Romans 12:21

as a perpetual adulteress. For Othello, outward actions, not inward intention or goodness, make the person. For Othello, too, there is no middle ground between “good” and “evil”. To him, Desdemona’s sin of adultery not only pollutes the specific relationship, rendering her completely corrupt in his perspective, but has the ability to pollute others and society. Othello’s misunderstanding of the situation reduces him to a wrongful condemner of a guiltless follower.¹⁰ Desdemona awakes, presenting the opportunity for her to plead her case. This, now more religious trial, unlike the judicial-like trial before the Senate in the first act, causes Desdemona to rely on her own innocence and salvation from God. Othello bids her, “*confess thee freely of thy sin*” (5.2.53; emphasis added) before interrogating her in this second trial scene. Desdemona begins by asserting her innocence, and then pleading at first for banishment, for life, for prayer, and then to God. Grennan argues that “As Desdemona argues passionately for the life of her body, it is the argument (the speech) itself that Othello smothers, taking away her life. Loss of speech, in her for whom it was the exact embodiment of self, is loss of life. In this way her death, her murder...confirms her life” (289-290). Desdemona does not waver from the truth, nor does she confess to anything—she has nothing to confess. She steadily accepts her fate in a way that suggests she has now relinquished her earthly role and is looking toward spiritual salvation.

The “truth” is revealed through multiple instances in this final act: Emilia’s own testimony despite Iago’s insistence, the letters found in Roderigo’s pockets, Iago’s eventual confession. However, it is Desdemona’s final words that haunt this act as they

¹⁰ Is. 5:20

reveal a different truth, perhaps a more holistic truth, to Othello and Emilia alone. Desdemona's innocent death at the hands of Othello suggests martyrdom for her faithful, Roman Catholic obedience as his wife, and for her community.¹¹ Her words do not so much condemn as they display her unwavering innocence and view to the afterlife. Desdemona's ultimate place on stage is on her bed, dead, caught between two sinners: a thief (Emilia) and a murderer (Othello), each professing her chastity and innocence before they die, and each also having either accused her of sin and/or asked her to offer the truth, no matter what their personal judgments were. Her final words are as dependent on truth as they are on her intent to make sure those whom she leaves behind are cared for, perhaps even offering a "mending" of society. Grennan asserts "Closing the moral circle of her speech-as-action, her last breath is a protective lie. In being at odds with the truth of 'fact' but consonant with the truth of love, her speech here achieves its mysterious fulfillment and release" (290). Desdemona's final words also give authority over her story in a way that echoes the equivocation technique utilized by Roman Catholic martyrs as discussed above. Faced with the decision to uphold their loyalty to both Rome and the Crown, these martyrs stealthily attempted to testify to this end, utilizing vague wording or outright lies to do so. Desdemona, too, is caught between loyalty to Othello and asserting herself and her faith. Deats sees that "At the denouement of the play, the marital model of amorous mutuality originally fervently endorsed by Othello and Desdemona is in shambles" (259), and although a mutual relationship of

¹¹ Gal. 6:2

husband and wife is clearly destroyed, Desdemona's final words point to a different notion of equality.

After Emilia walks in on the scene, she asks Desdemona what happened and whom to blame. Desdemona's crucial reply of "A guiltless death I die" (5.2.121) qualifies her statement, "Nobody. I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord— O, Farewell!" (5.2.122-123). This suggests a relation of innocence and concern with how others will be remembered and judged. I view Desdemona's final words as evidence of her authority—not a direct appeal to Othello's innocence, but an equivocation about who is guilty. I do not argue that Desdemona blatantly lies by saying she killed herself—that would have been a confession of an ultimate sin to a Roman Catholic, and thus would negate the insistence of "guiltless." I argue rather that she has taken the role of victim and perpetrator and redefined them; she is both a victim of Othello's anger and inciter of his anger. However, it is not his anger that we blame for his actions, but instead the act of murder, and Desdemona's testimony indicates her participation only as far as Othello's emotions are concerned. Gilligan states, "Thus, release from the *intimidation of inequality* finally allows women to express a judgment that had previously been withheld. What women then enunciate is not a new morality, but a morality disentangled from the constraints that formerly confused its perception and impeded its articulation" (95; emphasis added). We need Desdemona's final words in order to understand her moral character. She transcends her earthly role and ultimately acts for the good of relationship before she dies. Desdemona's final words are evidence of her authority and her artful

communication about how she wants to be remembered: as a dutiful wife, certainly, but also as an equal participant in the hopeful amelioration of her society.

In *Othello*, notions of selfhood, justice, and duty become corrupted as Othello's view of his role as a sovereign leader, and Desdemona's notion of her role as a subject, become problematic. Harkening back to the religious and political climate in which *Othello* was written, Shakespeare's play acts as a microcosm of the community. Desdemona's testimony of the events reveals her own reliance on religious power and authority, not unlike testimonies of the Protestant and Roman Catholic martyrs. As Ronan states, "No reflective spectator would charge the Deity unforgivingly with Desdemona's undeserved death: the role of a worthy victim is to suffer without final loss of faith or hope or love, and to be forthwith rewarded in another life" (276). Despite the stark injustice acted on the stage and read from the page,¹² and from which the tragedy in *Othello* stems, Desdemona lives on through her testimony and her faith. Turning next to *The Ring and the Book*, I discuss a similar reliance on spiritual authority and the promise of afterlife in Pompilia's dramatic monologue.

¹² Gronbeck-Tedesco argues, "Othello's love for Desdemona and hers for him do not suffice against evil. All that remains after Othello adds himself to the tableau of death is the mechanical promise that the penal system will punish Iago....It is love in the form of human collaboration and the abundance of actantial strategies such collaboration makes possible that is at the heart of the play's theatrical allegory. Love fails in Othello because the characters who strive to love do not understand how to sustain a collaborative bond against hostile and impenetrable social contexts" (269).

CHAPTER FOUR: POMPILIA IN *THE RING AND THE BOOK*

Robert Browning's use of the dramatic monologue form allowed him to create a unique voice and perspective for each of his speaking characters, in effect enabling the reader to begin to sympathize and even judge these characters apart from the identity of the poet. In his influential book, *Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, Robert Langbaum asserts that "judgement is largely psychologized and historicized. We adopt a man's point of view and the point of view of his age in order to judge him—which makes the judgment relative, limited in applicability to the particular conditions of the case. This is the kind of judgment we get in the dramatic monologue" (107). Browning's use of rhetoric in his characters' monologues ultimately constructs the characters. The reader must consider not only *how* the characters relate their stories, but *why* they do so. I believe Pompilia's monologue in *The Ring and the Book* contains both testimonial and martyrological rhetoric that highlights her authority and reliance on spiritual over physical salvation, similar to that of Shakespeare's Desdemona.

The words Pompilia says, and those she doesn't, suggest that she is well aware of how she is crafting her testimony in order to exonerate herself, those implicated with her, and even Count Guido Franceschini, her husband-turned-murderer. Ann-Marie Dunbar claims that

The Ring and the Book presents a particularly complicated representation of confession, situating this discursive form in both the legal and religious arenas

and often blurring the confessional practices of these institutions....The blurring of testimony and confession causes problems for the institutions—the Church, courts of law—that solicit and hear confessions, making it difficult for them to pronounce authoritative, decisive judgments. (135-36)

To Dunbar, Guido's monologue blurs the lines between confession and attempted testimony. However, Guido is ultimately condemned to hang, just like his accomplices, after the Pope himself rejects pardoning Guido. For most critics, what remains undecided is the question of Pompilia's innocence. Therefore, Dunbar's discussion of confession and testimony in regard to Guido is relevant to an analysis of Pompilia as well.

Pompilia's testimony is to a friar on her deathbed—not to the formal court or high-ranking members of the church, unlike Guido's confession. Browning's use of the dramatic monologue form allows one to hear Pompilia uninterrupted and with more urgency. Desdemona, we have seen, mainly speaks when prompted and often navigates between protecting Othello and displaying her innocence. Desdemona's full authority over her story is shown predominantly in the final two acts of the play. Pompilia, on the other hand, is given space to say exactly what she wants in the order she decides. She claims her authority over her story through her testimony of the events of her murder and her testimony of her faith throughout her monologue.

By the time Browning published *The Ring and the Book* in 1868, Victorian England had experienced a revolution in religious understanding. As discussed in the second chapter, the introduction of German Higher Criticism greatly altered belief in the Bible as containing whole or literal truth. Furthermore, the reestablishment of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1850 upset efforts for a united Anglican nation. This act also called into question the authority of leadership within the church and government. However,

Roman Catholic and Christian iconography remained influential for writers of this time, Browning included. Guido relies on a more traditional view of marriage, with man as the undisputed head of the household, even reaching back as far as ancient and pagan times of Arezzo. In contrast, Pompilia, like Desdemona, relies on Roman Catholic values and faith to proclaim her innocence and transcend her societal role. LaPorte asserts that

In theory, at least, the modern West had become less fertile ground for religious movements. But religious legend continued to emerge in modern cultures.... *The Ring and the Book* seems to embrace the possibility of modern miracles, and the truth of virgin hagiography in particular. (164)

Browning utilized Roman Catholic hagiography and Christian ideology in many of his poems, especially those set in Italy. He importantly employs hagiographic imagery to characterize Pompilia in *The Ring and the Book*. What is unique about this composition of dramatic monologues in comparison to Browning's earlier poems is the fact that he had also taken as inspiration a factual crime: an Italian murder case from 1698 documented in the *Old Yellow Book*. He further gave voice to the murdered victim, Pompilia. In this chapter, I engage scholars such as Robert Langbaum (1963), W. David Shaw (1968), William Walker (1984), Susan Brown (1996), and Katherine Anne Gilbert (2011), who discuss Browning's crafting of Pompilia's rhetorical strategy and characterization. I also include scholar, Ann-Marie Dunbar, and developmental psychologist, Carol Gilligan. Gilligan's more recent moral development theory is also pertinent here; there is a stark disparity between Pompilia's emphasis on care and harm versus Guido's emphasis on justice. However, unlike with Desdemona's dramatic present tense, we do not see Pompilia's progression in relation to Gilligan's theory being played

out before our eyes. Rather, her story is rendered through her retrospective retelling in her final testimony.

Notwithstanding Browning's inclusion of hagiographic imagery, such as St. George, and classical allusion in many of the monologues in *The Ring and the Book*, it is Pompilia's adherence to religious and martyrological rhetoric, especially her insistence on forgiveness and mercy, which suggests a slightly different technique of testimony and equivocation from that of Desdemona. Where Desdemona's innocence regarding adultery is quite clear, and this fact makes the tension in the play so frustrating, Pompilia's innocence of this crime is less so. For example, Pompilia stealthily omits pertinent episodes and details of her own agency in regard to her escape. Instead, she constantly forgives other characters while consistently upholding her own innocence. Dunbar claims that "Pompilia's experience of trauma—emotional, physical, and sexual—causes problems for her ability to narrate....These narrative "blanks" not only point to a trauma that defies representation, but they cue readers to view her monologue as testimony rather than confession" (139). I agree with Dunbar that Pompilia omits key moments, especially moments of violence, and that her monologue certainly constitutes a testimony based on her recollection of events. As stated earlier, one definition of confession, both in a religious sense and Dunbar's legal sense, implies guilt on behalf of the speaker. Testimony, on the other hand, involves the speaker either declaring their faith in God, in a religious sense, or restating events that happened to them. Although Pompilia restates the case in her own words and from her own perspective, and highlights her reliance on God, we cannot miss the fact that Pompilia's testimony is rife with calculation.

To be sure, Pompilia's innocence and authenticity have been topics debated by many critics. In his review of the poem in 1869, J. H. C. Fane declares that Browning creates characters that "range, we may almost say, through the entire scale of human nature" (178). Guido is typically considered to be, as related by Langbaum, "the incarnation of evil" (110) and to have "hated Pompilia for no other reason than that she is good" (111). Therefore, one can assume that Guido's monologues exemplify his evil nature. Pompilia, however, represents what Langbaum calls "nothing short of a saint" (110). Therefore, too, perhaps one should read her monologue as a strictly innocent testimony. However, more recent critics have begun to question Pompilia's complete innocence.

William Walker, one of the first to do so, argues that "Pompilia has well-defined motives for speaking, she can be ironic and sarcastic, and she is conscious of addressing an audience and of the rhetorical strategies she uses to do so..." (47). Taking up Walker's claim, Gilbert agrees that "If we do not read Pompilia's monologue in the tradition of Browning's other dramatic monologues, with an eye open for linguistic ironies, Pompilia becomes surreally pure, and this simplicity has convincingly been questioned by critics who argue that such flattening out in fact serves to further trap Pompilia" (339-340). Guido and Pompilia are both at least metaphorically on trial and facing inevitable death, and Gilbert suggests that Pompilia is much more aware of her situation, that she should not be read as simply innocent. However, no one contends that Guido is not guilty of murder—he confesses to this crime multiple times. Rather, it is the question of his justification of the crime—Pompilia's escape and alleged adultery—that makes the case

and poem so complex. I believe that Pompilia's emphasis on her spiritual survival and her spiritual bond with Caponsacchi indicates a pure outlook and, at the very least, repentance. Furthermore, unlike Guido, whose monologues are contradictory and peppered with deception, Pompilia shows no real malice toward the other characters, nor does she lack the goodness evident in her references to Caponsacchi and her calling upon God. I believe the former outlook of Pompilia as saintly or pure neither negates nor undermines the fact that she does strategically speak her truth. Her inherent goodness towards the other characters and her rhetoric both underscore her innocence and also reveal the authority she has through testimony. As an imperfect being, her eventual strict reliance on God's grace significantly points to martyr-like transcendence.

Given the legal context of Browning's work, the fact that Pompilia's rights are not upheld by the court or the church, but that she must take them into her own hands, is significant. As with the characters in *Othello*, Guido and Pompilia are attuned to different senses of morality as they relate to care versus justice. They are also attuned to different notions of salvation. Gilbert argues that "through Browning's creation of his own version of Pompilia, who speaks aloud to the public in the form her own monologue, Browning rejects attempts to limit women from asserting their rights in the public sphere" (320). Where in the *Old Yellow Book*, the lawyers only allude to or re-quote the factual Pompilia's (Francesca's) final testimony from the accounts of her witnesses, Browning significantly allows Pompilia herself to be heard. In her discussion of women's moral development, Gilligan offers an analysis of the effect that the inclusion of personal rights has on women's understanding of morality and authority. Although she is specifically

discussing women's rights in the 20th century, Gilligan's theory is still relevant as a lens through which to engage the past. Pompilia's adherence to spiritual matters directly relates to her progressive need to care for herself and, equally, to care for those she loves.

Gilligan asserts,

thus changes in women's rights change women's moral judgments, seasoning mercy with justice by enabling women to consider it moral to care not only for others but for themselves....When the concern with care extends from an injunction not to hurt others to an ideal of responsibility in social relationships, women begin to see their understanding of relationships as a source of moral strength. (149)

According to her testimony, Pompilia was primarily under the authority of her parents and then, through marriage, of Guido. However, once Pompilia acknowledges her abuse, her responsibility shifts from acting as a dutiful wife to ensuring her own safety. Brown emphasizes that "Pompilia is on trial for asserting herself and attempting self-determination in the face of directives to the contrary from the authorities of husband, church, and state. Guido appears more perturbed by her insubordination than by her alleged adultery" (16). In Browning's poem, I believe Pompilia, like Desdemona in Shakespeare's play, becomes the martyr figure who reveals the corruption in her society and possibly begins the healing process for that society. What, then, did Browning take from the original source besides a plot if he indeed gave Pompilia her own unique final testimony in his fictional piece?

The *Old Yellow Book* is a legal document that contains accounts of the events leading up to the historical Pompilia's murder and the murder itself. In the *Old Yellow Book*, the lawyers employ specific descriptive rhetoric when documenting the actual

crime and arguing for or against Pompilia's innocence. Their accounts are the direct inspiration for Pompilia and Guido. Brown argues that

While one can conclude that Browning did, as critics have contended, ignore the historical evidence that Pompilia was literate and unconsciously imbued her speech with the thought-patterns of his own literate mind, there remains the alternate possibility that Browning represented a character who is literate and possibly guilty, but suppresses the fact to strengthen her case. (26)

Pompilia undermines Guido's authority and role as husband through her testified efforts to escape his abuse. Pompilia's testimony of her own innocence and reflection on her death point to her reliance on spiritual salvation. Guido anguishes over the physical nature of his death and focuses on juridical truth with its emphasis on judgment and precedent. Pompilia, on the other hand, emphasizes her spiritual survival in the face of physical death and displays her authority through words—words that she wills to be heard from beyond the grave.

Browning's incorporation of themes found within the *Old Yellow Book* also presents key insights into how and why Pompilia and Guido retell similar scenes the way they do. The lawyers emphasize characteristics of Guido and Pompilia that are reflected in *The Ring and the Book*. In the *Old Yellow Book*, Archangeli, the lawyer arguing on Guido's behalf, asserts that Pompilia's assumed adultery and the birth of her son, called "it," "increased" Guido's "shame," "resentment," and "anger" (Gest, 143). He also suggests that Guido's shame extends from his loss of reputation in Tuscany "where a good reputation is exceedingly cherished by men of good family" (Gest, 143). Guido echoes these sentiments throughout his two monologues in *The Ring and the Book*, and it

seems that much of the rhetoric employed here afforded Browning the information for Guido's reasoning to the court in his first monologue in Book V.

The second half of Archangeli's passage emphasizes Guido's troubled mindset, which is made apparent in his second monologue in Book XI. He is called an "unfortunate man," who, driven to "desperation," acted upon "blinded intellect" (Gest, 143). The diction here underscores an ill-fate, along with emotionally driven actions akin to the "madness" Guido himself suggests. Caponsacchi is referred to the "banished lover" (Gest, 144). Archangeli places guilt on Caponsacchi and, necessarily, on Pompilia. The section ends with a sentence that incorporates Violante's and Pietro's deaths into one swift "alleged" action of "cut[ting] the throats" before "hav[ing] stabbed Francesca [Pompilia] with so many wounds" (Gest, 144). This isolation of one victim over the other two is also displayed in Guido's own retelling. The brief reiteration of the action as "alleged" suggests an undermining of the fact that Guido is guilty of the murder and places more emphasis on Guido's emotional state.

Another important defense from Archangeli, and one that perhaps inspired Browning significantly, is the appeal for the historical Guido's innocence. Archangeli states that "Although, as I have said, it would be enough for our side, in order that Count Guido should not be lawfully convicted, that his *confession* should be received as a whole, without dividing it" (Gest, 164; emphasis mine). The use of the word *confession* indicates, as we have seen, the notion of guilt. Interestingly, Browning has divided Guido's confession in two—Pompilia's final testimony (Book VII) is written between Guido's initial trial (Book V) and his subsequent petition before his own death (Book

XI), as if Browning has chosen to give Pompilia a perspective that both undermines Guido's initial appeal and highlights his subsequent loss of agency.

Like Archangeli in the original source text, Guido acknowledges the importance of his rhetorical strategy in persuading his listeners of the justification of his actions. While he admits to murdering Pompilia and her parents, his confession also comprises many appeals and rhetorical questions. Guido's first monologue takes place in front of the court at Rome, and here he is still given his formal title of "Count Guido Franceschini." His appeal to the court begins with emphasis on his intellectual ability to plead for himself: "I want my head / To save my neck, there's work awaits me still" (5.7-8). The synecdoche of "head" as 'mind' and "neck" as 'life' or 'body' not only introduces the fact that Guido is operating in a way to scheme and persuade his listeners, but also suggests that Guido is fixated on the physical state of embodiment and life.

Guido also mostly appeals to the institutions of the church and state, highlighting his emphasis on judgment and justice. He states, "Father and mother shall the woman leave, / Cleave to the husband, be it for weal or woe: / There is the law: what sets this law aside in my particular case?" (5.581-584) Here, Guido's emphasis on Pauline marriage doctrine is similar to what we have seen in *Othello*, especially during Desdemona's wifely appeal to the Senate.¹³ However, Guido's aim is to prove Pompilia an adulteress who undermined his, and by extension Biblical, authority. The use of a rhetorical question in this instance perhaps is Guido's way of condemning his listeners as accomplices to his own murder. Guido frequently utilizes rhetorical questions and quotes

¹³ Eph. 5: 22-24 and Eph. 5: 31

others, shifting the blame away from himself. Furthermore, similar to Othello, Guido's main duty is a public duty; he has a strict notion of morality that necessitates his authorial control over Pompilia as his wife. However, he had never aspired to be a husband. Guido's new role, like Othello's, causes a stark shift in understanding of morality, especially when his authority is destabilized. As Pompilia's husband, he expects loyalty and submissiveness that, when flouted, cause him to view Pompilia as a traitor to their marriage and thus to justify her murder. Like Othello, Guido cannot separate justice from the relationship, as he indicates that the law is binding for everyone equally.

Guido's second monologue is to an audience of members of the church—a Cardinal and an Abbott—in his cell prior to his execution. Importantly, this title is simply "Guido," as if Browning has chosen to strip him of his titles and apparent authority, relegating him to equal terms with the "Pompilia" of Book VII. He begins the second monologue with another appeal to his upbringing in a higher-class: "two good Tuscan names" (11.2) "I do abjure you, help me, Sirs! My blood / Comes from as far a source...Sirs, I beseech you by blood sympathy" (11.15-16, 19). However, the fact that his petition is focused on listeners' sympathy indicates a loss of hope in his own ability to save himself. Guido later uses another rhetorical question in order to examine the defects of the first trial: "Morality and Religion conquer me. / If Law sufficed would you come here, entreat / I supplement law, and confess forsooth? / Did not the Trial show things plain enough?" (11.508-10) Guido's desperation and frustration suggest his attempt to highlight the fact that he has already both pleaded for his life and justified his actions. However, he already knows that the Pope has rejected his pardon, and Guido seems at

odds with his new Roman Catholic audience. In *The Dialectical Temper: The Rhetorical Art of Robert Browning*, W. David Shaw argues that in his second monologue, “[Guido’s] real audience is now himself... [his oration] has for him the subtler satisfaction of substituting for the court’s moral absolutes a complex rhetorical morality that seeks desperately, but without final success, to justify Count Guido to himself” (262). Guido’s temper in the second monologue has affinities with Othello’s disposition in the final acts of Shakespeare’s play. Both characters allow their anger to influence their actions. Furthermore, Guido’s insistence on justifying his actions echoes Othello’s understanding of justice and the need to punish Desdemona for adultery. However, Othello is taunted by Iago’s deception as his own perspective becomes increasingly muddled, and he consistently places blame on Desdemona as he attempts to justify her murder because of her supposed sin. Guido, on the other hand, has only his own deceit and anger to account for his act. Guido’s second confession may be simply another way to justify his actions to the public, and as Shaw argues, to himself. This indicates a need for validation that comes only from his peers, from institutions, and not through an appeal for forgiveness from God.

Guido shows that it is ultimately Pompilia’s dying testimony, and not her past actions, that renders him so anxious. In Book V, he declares: “But my wife is still alive, / Has breath enough to tell her story yet, / Her way, which is not mine, no doubt at all” (5.1687-1689). Here, Guido does not just suggest the idea that there are two sides to the murder story. With the use of “her story” and “her way,” he implies that Pompilia’s

agency and relation of the story are outside of his control. As in his first monologue, in Book XI Guido reflects on the fact that Pompilia is living and able to testify:

She too must shimmer through the gloom o' the grave,
Come and confront me—not at the judgment-seat
Where I could twist her soul, as erst her flesh,
And turn her truth into a lie,—but there,
O' the death-bed, with God's hand between us both,
Striking me dumb, and helping her to speak,
Tell her own story her own way, and turn
My plausibility to nothingness! (11.1682-87)

Guido is not only aware of Pompilia's agency but also of her inherent goodness. He confesses that, were she "at the judgment-seat," (and I believe he is talking specifically of the courtroom and not in Heaven), he would have the power and the will to contort her words and render her testimony void. Guido's image of twisting Pompilia's "soul" indicates a reference to religious faith and belief that Guido trusts he could and should manipulate, essentially damning Pompilia's reputation even after her death. However, he acknowledges that it is with "God's hand" that Pompilia is given the power with which to speak, indicating his understanding of her salvation and suggesting his own conviction. Furthermore, his use of "plausibility" instead of factuality or truth actually undermines his argument in full—the "nothingness" he suggests implies that he knows his words have no substance once Pompilia testifies. At this moment Guido reveals less concern that her story may be simply different from his, and more concern that she will speak

truths that reveal his lies. Guido has not only murdered his wife—reducing her body to “nothingness” in his perspective—but through forging of the love letters to Caponsacchi, he has acted not only to silence her, but to characterize Pompilia in a way that she fits his story.¹⁴ Guido desires Pompilia to conform to his idea of what should be, and since she proved to be a wife that “refused from the beginning day / Either in body or soul to cleave to [his]” (5.608-09), then perhaps he can persuade others to believe that she was adulterous in the fabricated narrative of his defense. This is conceivably why Browning found it so imperative to give her a voice of her own.

In the *Old Yellow Book*, while Gambi, a lawyer arguing on Pompilia’s behalf, uses diction that characterizes Guido as a more sinister and calculating figure, he significantly highlights the saintliness of Pompilia. His argument that Guido had been “plotting to take vengeance” and had a “vicious purpose” (Gest, 196) offers a different stance actually echoed in Guido’s second monologue. Guido was not driven by emotional impulse. Rather, he had prior intent to murder Pompilia and her parents. Gambi calls Caponsacchi “Canon” instead of “lover,” which immediately renders the guilt from the alleged affair null by placing importance on Caponsacchi’s role in the church. Gambi’s

¹⁴ The notion of Guido being haunted by Pompilia is discussed in “Dead Women Do Tell Tales,” in which Randa Helfield relates that “Accused of Pompilia’s murder, it is Guido who is, perhaps, most interested in re-representing her character and her story. He attempts to frame his wife in two ways: by forging letters in her name, and by accusing her of an affair with Caponsacchi (V.852-59) . . . Although Guido’s particular brand of art destroys his wife’s body, he cannot kill her spirit, which continues to live on after her death. Not only does she survive long enough to tell her tale and thus ruin the effect of his . . . but also Guido’s own narrative helps to resurrect Pompilia and immortalize her story by speaking her truth as well as his” (17-18).

part also draws out the murder in a way that separates the victims as individuals. In an almost Biblical-like account, Guido is said to have approached Violante first, where he,

immediately attacked her and cut her throat with aforesaid swords. She fell dead immediately, just as Pietro also, whose throat was likewise cut, departed this life. Francesca indeed managed to hide herself under a bed, but was discovered and wounded in many places. Then, *by the permission of God*, she did not die at once—although after a few days she also passed away—so that *she was able to reveal this monstrous crime*. (Gest, 196; emphasis mine)

The diction of “departed this life,” “permission of God,” and “reveal this monstrous crime” suggests a religious connotation which highlights Pompilia’s innocence and faith while purposefully indicating the violence of the crime and Guido’s own evil nature in committing it. Further, even here, Pompilia is painted as a saintly figure who witnesses for others the truth. The detail of her “hiding herself under a bed” exposes her agency and is tellingly left out of Archangeli’s passage. The historical Pompilia strove to live, and Browning’s Pompilia strives to be heard.

Pompilia’s monologue is, like Guido’s, rich with rhetoric. It is clear from the first part of her monologue that she possesses both agency and will. As Walker writes, “At the outset of her address, she has well-defined motives for speaking and has already achieved the understanding of herself which she will impart to her audience” (60). Pompilia immediately assumes control over how her story is documented, as if, like a martyr, she knows the written form of her “trial” will continue to be read: “and they will add, I hope, / When they insert my death, a word or two,— / Omitting all about the mode of death,— ... That I had been a mother of a son / Exactly two weeks” (7.9-11; 13-14). She does not want the focus to be on her murder, and she even goes so far as to reject recounting the act in full. Instead, she emphasizes her motherhood in an attempt to speak to her son,

Gaetano, after her death. She also does this in order to show herself as both a caregiver and an innocent.

Moreover, throughout her monologue Pompilia calls upon God as the source and judge of truth. After having been disappointed in her attempts to appeal to both the court and the church for help, Pompilia testifies:

Henceforth I looked to God

Only, nor cared my desecrated soul

Should have fair walls, gay windows for the world.

God's glimmer, that came through the ruin-top,

Was witness why all lights were quenched inside:

Henceforth I asked God counsel, not mankind. (7.854-59)

Pompilia rejects the advice from the men who told her simply to act dutifully as Guido's wife. In alignment with Gilligan's theory, Pompilia truthfully depicts her own way of caring for herself and taking matters into her own hands. She suggests that her physical state is corrupted, yet she also claims that this is of no importance. What matters more is that God can see the truth, "witness" why her soul and body are so tainted, and thus can be the only source of her salvation.

Pompilia's reliance on God's knowledge over earthly advice is not evidence that she wholly rejects relationships with and caring for others. However, she becomes increasingly reliant on a spiritual, not physical, connection. This reliance is evident in her detail that Guido's "soul has never lain beside [her] soul" (7.1733), yet Caponsachi is the "angel" (7.1643) who has "restored [her] soul" (7.1666). Pompilia views relationship

as spiritual. I believe she emphasizes this to strengthen her testimony of God's salvation and to underscore her innocence in regard to the adultery charge. It is significant that Pompilia does not have—nor ever really had—governance of her own body. It has been sold, abused, populated by another being (her son), and eventually mutilated.

Furthermore, her own use of her body has been questioned. Arguably, the only character who has not used her body as a means to his own end is Caponsacchi. This is an indication of why Pompilia places importance on the spiritual over the corporeal and her words over her deeds.

Pompilia's use of martyrological rhetoric is also shown in the ways in which she forgives—or cannot forgive—others. She constantly acts to pardon not only Caponsacchi and her parents, but also Guido himself. In the *Old Yellow Book*, Bottini, another lawyer defending Pompilia, writes, “nor does the declaration of our dying woman tend chiefly to vengeance, since it appears from the said affidavits, that she shrank with horror from that, as she always claimed that she pardoned her husband most freely” (Gest, 254). This is echoed in Pompilia's monologue. However, she relates that it is God who will be the ultimate judge, again emphasizing her reliance on the soul's salvation: “I—pardon [Guido]? So far as lies in me, / I give him for his good the life he takes, / Let him make God amends” (7.1709-1711). Pompilia specifically testifies to sacrificing her own life for Guido's forgiveness. She uses her words to preserve her integrity and to show that God alone imposes final judgment; she does not damn the other characters through her own punishment. She does, however, indicate that Guido must make “amends,” suggesting that he is guilty of wrongdoing. Shaw observes that

The different characters in the drama pass in review before Pompilia for the last time as she delivers her judgement on each. She pardons her parents and even pleads to God on Guido's behalf. She believes that by purifying his victim, her husband has made her better able to redeem him through her martyrdom. (291)

Pompilia's pardoning of the other characters, and her fierce protection of Caponsacchi's reputation, all align with early modern martyrs' pardoning of their executioners through God's grace and pleas for others to seek forgiveness.¹⁵

Importantly, the one character for whom Pompilia does not call upon God's forgiveness is her maidservant, Margherita. As with Emilia in *Othello*, Margherita is an accomplice to the scheme of framing her mistress as an adulteress. Unlike Emilia, however, Margherita, according to Pompilia, is aware of and complacent in her role. Nor does Margherita come to appeal for Pompilia's innocence as Emilia strongly appeals for Desdemona's. As with the use of Desdemona's handkerchief, the letters are pieces of evidence that show repeated correspondence and intimacy between Pompilia and Caponsacchi. It is understood that Guido himself forged the letters to frame Pompilia. Pompilia's illiteracy is paramount in proving that she could neither write nor read the letters. She extensively details Margherita's participation in the transmitting of the letters

¹⁵ Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* has a plethora of examples of this. In his final testimony, Mr. George Wishart (d. 1546) declares: "I beseech thee, Father of heaven, to forgive them that have of any ignorance or else have of any evil mind forged any lies upon me: I forgive them with all my heart. I beseech Christ to forgive them that have condemned me to death this day ignorantly; and, last of all, I beseech you, brethren and sisters, to exhort your prelates to the learning of the Word of God, that they at the last may be ashamed to do evil, and learn to do good" (162). Lady Jane Grey (d. 1554) writes to her sister, "...I exhort you that you never swerve, neither for hope of life nor for fear of death...And if you cleave unto him, he will prolong your days to your comfort and his glory: to which glory God bring me now, and you hereafter, when it pleaseth him to call you. Fare you well, good sister, and put your only trust in God" (185). Likewise, Foxe details the martyrdom of John Rogers (d. 1555) who upon his execution was called a heretic, "To which the unshaken hero of God replied, 'That shall be known at the day of judgment.' 'Well,' said the sheriff, 'I will never pray for thee.' 'But I will pray for you,' said Mr. Rogers" (195).

to Caponsacchi. At a moment when Margherita hands her a letter allegedly from Caponsacchi, Pompilia testifies that she

...took it from [Margherita's] hand
And tore it to shreds, "Why, join the rest
Who harm me? Have I ever done you wrong?
People have told me 't is you who harm myself:
Let it suffice I either feel no wrong
Or else forgive it,—yet you turn my foe!
The others hunt me and you throw and noose! (7.1126-32)

Pompilia's emphasis on harm versus care is notable. She adheres to this moral code by both detailing her victimization and her need to forgive. She implores Margherita to reflect on her own actions in light of Pompilia's innocent treatment of her. However, Pompilia seems to admit that because Margherita continues to harass her and is unrepentant, perhaps the maidservant is unpardonable. Pompilia quotes her own words to Margherita in order to highlight the personal nature of this part of her testimony. She does not pardon Margherita to her listeners or appeal to God. Rather, she emphasizes her own innocence by way of her attempted forgiveness.

Pompilia rejects directly noting Guido's own hand in the letter forging:

Whereupon...no, I leave my husband out!
It is not to do him more hurt, I speak.
Let it suffice, when misery was most,
One day, I swooned and got a respite so.

She stooped as I was slowly coming to,
This Margherita, ever on my trace,
And whispered—'Caponsacchi'(7.1134-40; emphasis mine)

Just as martyrs at times rejected stating facts as plainly or simply as they could, Pompilia still indicates Guido's participation by stating that she will not speak about it. Although she testifies that it is because she is focusing on limiting the harm she causes to others, Pompilia still needs to be seen as innocent. Instead of condemning Guido, she has condemned Margherita. Perhaps this is because Margherita will not face consequences; however, this tactic also underscores Pompilia's innocence and her illiteracy. Utilizing equivocation, although Pompilia does indeed state that she eventually asked Margherita to summon Caponsacchi, she does so in a way that highlights her need for outside help and her desperation for safety. Equivocation, as discussed above, is the technique of manipulating or withholding words in order to render meaning ambiguous to the listener, while maintaining the truth for the speaker. This technique was utilized by Roman Catholics and criticized by Protestants not only in the early modern period, but in Victorian England as well. Pompilia's use of equivocation in her testimony indicates that she realizes the need to care for herself.

In contrast, Guido effectively neglects to speak in full of the forged letters, instead focusing on Pompilia's own actions leading up to her flight. Although he does complicate matters by suggesting the letters were forged, he doesn't quite confess to his participation, nor does he name Margherita. Instead, he chooses simply to acknowledge them as a possible means by which he could present the court with evidence of an already

guilty Pompilia: “The letters,—do they incriminate? / But what if the whole prove a prank o’ the pen, / Flight of the fancy, none of theirs at all,” (5.1203-05). Again, by way of a rhetorical question, Guido involves the court in a way that challenges the letters in question. This also undermines the necessity of Pompilia’s illiteracy. He evades a full confession because, to his argument, “[he] did righteously in bringing doubts / For the law to solve—take the solution now!” (5. 1212-23). Guido emphasizes justice for Pompilia’s action, thwarting any attempt to exonerate her or incriminate himself in regard to the forgery. To Guido, Pompilia’s punishment and his acquittal rest on the notion of Pompilia’s physical infidelity.

On the account of the actual murder, Guido’s diction in his first monologue displays an outward judgment on the victims he slew with the help of his conspirators. Perhaps to feign remorse, he admits that had Pompilia or Pietro, her (adoptive) father, opened the door, he would not have committed the murders. He at first refers to Pompilia as a “tender thing” (5.1638), showing a reliance on physical aspects while also portraying her as sub-human. When coupled with the reflection that she “once was good and pure, was once my lamb” (5.1639), Guido suggests Pompilia’s corruption from dutiful wife to insubordinate woman. Despite this, he argues that because it was Violante, the “hag, she that brought hell / For a dowry with her to her husband’s house” (5.1649-50) who opened the door, his emotions were incited, and he acted out of rage. Furthermore, his emphasis on an almost choleric “heat” stemming from the “heart / To the brain” (5.1653-54) exhibits the image of emotion tainting his reasoning, much as Othello’s emotions seem to guide his reasoning throughout the play. For these characters, anger and jealousy are

significantly tied to their actions and sense of justice, especially when this justice is applied to their own senses of selfhood and authority which are threatened by insubordination from a domestic source—their wives.

Guido continues to relate that he “was rapt away by the impulse, one / Immeasurable everlasting wave of a need / To abolish that detested life” (5.1661-63), before emphasizing that he was “mad / Blind, stamped on all, the earth-worms with the asp, / And ended so” (5.1667-1669). Guido’s reliance on proving that he was in a state of madness and acted on impulse is underscored by his attempt to show himself as a reasonable man in court. His suggestion that his act of murder will “abolish” Violante’s “life” also implies his belief in and emphasis on physical life as the only life that matters and the best life to punish. Furthermore, his insistence on aligning his victims to creatures that are associated with earth suggests that he constructs them to appear organic and subhuman, corrupt, and even disgusting.

In his second monologue, Guido has seemingly shirked off any appearance of feeling remorse for his crime. Indeed, he even argues casuistically

Jealousy maddens people, why not him?

Say, he was maddened, so, forgivable!

Humanity pleads that though the wife were true,

The priest true, and the pair of liars true,

They might seem false to one man in the world! (11.885-889)

As if Browning had taken a cue from Shakespeare’s play, Guido sets himself up as a jealously enraged husband. Where Othello’s madness stems from a dissonance between

his authority and Iago's continual reminder of Desdemona's supposed infidelity, Guido's calculations and schemes suggest that in his second monologue at least, he is trying to reconcile his actions by whatever means he can. His use of a rhetorical question operates to evoke sympathy and understanding from his listeners. He argues that he was simply acting out of human nature and jealousy. Therefore, because he was not in a state of sanity, he must be pardoned. However, Guido himself undermines this argument later in the monologue.

He continues with the revelation that it was not the feelings of pity or regret that stopped him at the door, but the consideration that his plan might prove the "natural failure" (11.1578). He imagines his three victims as "scorpions" (11.1594) and "taenia" (11.1604), reminiscent of the language in his first monologue. This again demonstrates feelings of disgust and dominance independent of whether he has been operating on reason or desperation. He reflects, "If only [Pompilia] is stopped and stamped on, good!" (11.1597) and, unlike in his first monologue, it is she, not Violante, who incites his fury. It is also her death that will bring him most satisfaction. Guido contradicts himself in a way that shows he no longer has his former reason to use as a crutch. Furthermore, Guido focuses on his "knock" and seems to relish the fact that "this once for [his] sake / The impossible was effected...So, I had my way, / did my deed..." (11.1599-1600, 1602-103). Guido highlights the relief he felt that the murder was accomplished "his way," as opposed to Pompilia's telling her story in "her way." That he positions the three as "king, / Queen and knave" (11.1600-01) and then "drawn and dead and damned" (11.1608) functions to display Guido's emphasis on justice and hierarchy. Yet, after the murder, he

groups “these” together with similar adjectives indicating a belief that loss of physical life imposes a loss of individual self. Shaw observes that “Though [Guido] admits that he should have spared two of his victims, the sheer formal symmetry of ‘king / Queen and knave in a sequence’ (11.1602-03) required that he kill all three together” (264). Guido’s use of the word “revenge” (11.1607) and the indication of hope that he “might thrive” (11.1608) further suggest ill-intent and preconception.

Pompilia’s account of the murder lacks the conspicuous deception of Guido’s. Pompilia is candid, and hers is not so much a persuasive speech as it is a testimonial reflection and recuperation of the other characters. Furthermore, her diction suggests again the technique of equivocation. Pompilia makes no attempt to hide the fact that she has relied upon Caponsacchi. However, she equivocates about the nature of their relationship, painting him as a religious guide or angel rather than a worldly friend. Her diction when talking about Caponsacchi reveals a spiritual bond that she could not have with the abusive Guido. Moreover, Pompilia seems to reject feelings of anger or vengeance over Guido’s attempted murder of her. It is as if she does not resent her physical life and the loss of it—Browning’s choice to emphasize God and the spiritual in Pompilia’s monologue functions to display her inward purity. Pompilia reflects on her approaching death, starting with an apostrophe to Caponsacchi:

O lover of my life, O soldier saint,
No work begun shall ever pause for death!
Love will be helpful to me more and more
I’ the coming course, the new path I must tread,

My weak hand in thy strong hand, strong for that! (7.1786-90)

The apostrophe reveals another moment of attempted communication beyond her death. The use of personification and synecdoche highlights the fact that Pompilia still looks to Caponsacchi as the guide her husband failed to be, one to give her strength to face death and to “tread” the “new path” of the afterlife. Caponsacchi not only loved her “life” enough to at least try to save it, but she directly states that this “work” will be perpetual; she will live on after her physical death and Caponsacchi, as her spiritual guide, will be there with her eventually. Although she alludes to her “weak hand” as a weak self, this is undermined by the very act of her speaking about becoming strong—she has already willed it and believes it.

Additionally, Pompilia does not meditate on her murder, nor does she use this moment to condemn Guido or persuade her listener of his violent actions. She implores the friar to “Tell [Caponsacchi]...it was the name of him I sprang to meet” (7.1806, 1808). Pompilia’s use of the imperative further proves her newfound authority and shows her will to be heard and understood after death. However, this is juxtaposed with the fact that the “knock” symbolized a “summons and the end” (7.1809), which implies the call toward death and an abrupt stop to action. Pompilia places Caponsacchi as her “great heart” and “strong hand” (7.1810) indicating again the spiritual bond she feels with him. That she alludes to both “Murder” and “hell” on the threshold implies less about Guido’s personal sin and more about evil in general, the role of the devil, with the intent of “exclud[ing] [her] heaven” (7.1805). Her choice of “heaven” over mere life infers not only

the presence of sin that can tarnish a soul, but also indicates that Pompilia's final thoughts are on the afterlife with God.

The lawyers do not report the last words of Guido or Pompilia verbatim in the *Old Yellow Book*, yet Guido's final appeal and Pompilia's last testimonial words in *The Ring and the Book* highlight their final reflections and consequently their true natures. Guido's final words of "Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God,... / Pompilia, will you let them murder me?" (11.2444-45) form another hierarchy giving Pompilia the most agency, but the syntax implies two very different meanings depending on how the line is read. Does Guido simply implore the men of God, who serve Christ, who saves men whom Mary intercedes for, who is ordained as the mother of God, by God, and Pompilia to save him from the law? Or, does he suggest that Pompilia is the only one who can save him, not from the law's judgement that condemns his body, but from the judgment of religion that condemns his soul? Either reading shows Guido's final appeal as putting Pompilia's own testimony and judgement above all else. The anxiety and desperation he announces do not point to a change in moral or relational understanding. Rather, Guido's change is displayed by his indication of whom or what he relies upon for salvation. He does not appeal to Pompilia's love for him, he appeals to her testimony. Her testimony is the source of the truth, and Guido understands this.

On the other hand, Pompilia's final moment is a reflection upon marriage and her ultimate relinquishing of earthly ideals—even her supposed love of Caponsacchi. She states,

Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,

Mere imitation of the inimitable:

In heaven we have the real and true and sure.

'T is there they neither marry nor are given

In marriage but are as the angels. (7.1824-28)

Her repetition of “be as the angels” in the following lines (5.1833) suggests that her thoughts are now on an ideal life after death. Her last words do seem to emphasize Caponsacchi. However, the pronouns she uses and the agency she proclaims display her full transcendence:

....Could we by a wish

Have what we will and get the future now,

Would we wish aught done undone in the past?

So, let [Caponsacchi] wait God's instant we call years;

Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,

Do out the duty! Through such souls alone

God stooping shows sufficient of His light

For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise. (7.1838-45)

Pompilia's resolution mimics the final testimonies of martyrs facing their death. Her use of “we” suggests a universal understanding of human inability to redo actions done in the past. She acknowledges that Caponsacchi—whom she loves, albeit equivocally—will live on. Yet, she instructs him to live out his life faithfully serving God. She also indicates again that Caponsacchi is a “soul” through whom God has acted. The emphasis on God illuminating the way for dead souls to rise implies her final reliance on her

salvation through faith. Further, her use of “I” as the subject indicates an agency that she takes upon herself. Although she will not “rise” in the physical sense, her suggestion indicates her belief in both her soul’s rising into heaven and her reputation rising from her testimony. Unlike Guido’s consistent use of “I” and “me” which serves to separate him from his listeners and the other characters, Pompilia creates community through her words. Her use of “us” prior to “I” suggests, in part, that she views herself as an example of a faithful woman for others. Furthermore, where Guido’s final words attest to his anxiety over Pompilia’s final judgment, just as his anxiety over her ability to speak attests to his own lack of self-reliance, Pompilia looks to God and her spiritual existence as the means by which she, and her “love,” will survive past death. Pompilia’s ultimate transcendence is reliant on her faith that she will live on in Heaven. Her testimony demonstrates her progress toward caring for herself and relying on God’s grace.

In the historical case, as in Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, Guido and his conspirators were condemned to death. By giving Pompilia the authority to voice her plight, Browning allows her to live on in writing and saves her tale in a way that the *Old Yellow Book* could not. Pompilia’s goodness may not stem from absolute chastity, but it is shown through her lack of malice and her attempt to prove her soul is preserved. As the martyrs in early modern England often pardoned their accusers, so, too, does Pompilia embody this forgiving tone within her testimony to highlight her innocence and show her authority. If one believes Bottini’s statement in the *Old Yellow Book*, that “words should always be interpreted according to the intention of the one who utters them...” (Gest, 224) then one may take Browning’s use of testimonial rhetoric within the dramatic

monologue form as a presentation of the performative aspects of human nature and the connectedness of life—connectedness of speaker and listener, writer and reader. This also displays his ability to give life back to his speakers, and Pompilia of *The Ring and the Book* is at the forefront of this.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The #MeToo Movement encourages women to testify about their experiences and empowers them to come forward and reclaim their own stories. This movement not only impacted me personally, it has impacted the way I read and study literature. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a good friend about this specific thesis and how he came to understand Desdemona and Pompilia through my analysis. My friend settled on the word “heroic” to describe these characters, and I took this as significant given the way in which both Desdemona and Pompilia have traditionally been read. It seems that perhaps an evaluation of Desdemona and Pompilia as empowered and “heroic” figures is a relevant appraisal for future criticism.

In this study, I have discussed the ways in which Desdemona in William Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Pompilia in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* take on suffering at the hands of their husbands and in turn display their authority as they increasingly rely on their spiritual salvation over physical death. Both Desdemona and Pompilia display this authority through their final testimonies. As we have seen, the definition of legal and religious testimony, unlike Dunbar’s definition of legal confession and one definition of religious confession of sin/guilt, indicates that a speaker attests to a wrong done *to* them or declares faith in God. Desdemona and Pompilia steadily rely on their own agency through faith and adhere to a moral code of caring for others and, by extension, ultimately for themselves.

Desdemona and Pompilia exemplify Carol Gilligan's understanding of women's moral development. They progress from remaining wholly submissive to the judgments of others, to becoming responsible parties in the circumstances that surround them, emphasizing care and community for themselves and others. They also exemplify conventional notions of Christian goodness, as related by Paula M. Kane's study of *Victim Souls*. Desdemona and Pompilia seem to embody examples of martyrs who both needed to maintain loyalty to the state while also depending on their faith in the Christian God.

Throughout this study, I have relied upon the religious, political, and historical circumstances that occurred in both Shakespeare's and Browning's times. As was discussed in the second chapter, the excommunication of Queen Elizabeth I reestablished Anglicanism as the dominant religion of England. With this came heightened anxiety over loyalty to the Crown as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church. In 1850, the Roman Catholic hierarchy was reestablished in England, once again bringing into question the authority of the Anglican Church and State. These two dates mark important signposts for my discussion of Shakespeare's play and Browning's dramatic monologue. Both Desdemona and Pompilia exhibit strong loyalties to their husbands, yet when their own livelihood and fidelity are challenged, they choose caring for themselves and those around them by way of faith, undermining their roles as wives. So, too, did early modern Protestant and Roman Catholic martyrs alike die for their faiths and employ testimonial rhetoric in order to showcase their unwavering faith in the church and loyalty to the state, all the while stressing their steadfast belief in spiritual life after physical death.

Early modern martyrs, Protestants and Roman Catholics alike, used their testimonies to establish their authority and account for their truth. They favored mercy and forgiveness and pleaded for other believers to put their faith in God. They also found moral and spiritual strength despite their tortures and deaths. However, it is the Roman Catholic martyrs who predominantly used equivocation in order to maintain their testimonial loyalty to both the Crown and the Pope. Equivocation is the technique of withholding information or giving ambiguous testimony to listeners, while simultaneously preserving one's truth. Although it was vilified and condemned by Protestants for centuries, and although Dailey reminds us that "Equivocation came to represent a body of duplicitous practices that were summoned in the state's moral and legal condemnation of the Catholic community" (165), Roman Catholics used equivocation both to protect others and defend themselves as martyrs. While it may seem problematic to argue that both Desdemona and Pompilia employ this technique, it is worth remembering how they are portrayed and that they profess to be Roman Catholic. They do not use equivocation to deceive or lie. Rather, they use equivocation to maintain care and safety of others while also highlighting their own innocence through faith. In short, they both take responsibility for their roles, forgive and protect even those who have harmed them, and display their authority by establishing themselves as faithful believers in God.

This study worked to discover how Desdemona and Pompilia reclaim their stories through testimonial and martyrological rhetoric in order to highlight how these characters are given authority through their statements of faith and innocence. Desdemona's and

Pompilia's testimonies encompass their own crafting of their stories in order not only to exonerate themselves, but also to establish care and help for those around them. This study is particularly relevant to our modern understanding and interest in women's testimonies of their abuse and innocence and raises questions of what authority to trust and why into conversation. If we read these characters as simply innocent victims of jealous husbands, we neglect their agency in their final testimonies and do not fully appreciate them as examples of strong female characters. Words have power, and Shakespeare and Browning allowed their female characters power, despite their dying flesh, through their spiritually alive words.

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