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Desdemona's Dildo: Fetish Objects and Transitional Sex in *Othello*

PERRY GUEVARA

The pilot episode of the British 1970s comedic sitcom *Are You Being Served?* opens in Grace Brothers, a London department store undergoing a major change.¹ The women's clothing department is in the process of relocating into the same space as the men's, an area which both must share. Much of the sitcom's humor relies on the conflict arising in this hybrid, curiously gendered space. The once separate feminine and masculine spaces are displaced by the collision of both, a newly confused space that engenders dysfunction and consequently elicits comedic results. Later in the episode, the floor supervisor, Captain Peacock, teaches a rookie employee, Mr. Lucas, how to properly flute a handkerchief. With dexterity and ease, Peacock flutes his handkerchief into an unmistakably erect phallus before stuffing it into his coat pocket. However, when the inexperienced Lucas attempts the same, his handkerchief flops over clumsily like a flaccid penis. In the likening of skill to erection and inability to penile flaccidity, this made-for-TV moment wittily anticipates the premise of this essay. Turning to the early modern stage, I argue that the most notorious handkerchief in all of English literary history, Desdemona's in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, is materially as well as semiologically phallic. That is, by connecting the handkerchief both to a fledgling concept of fetish emerging in the period's travel literature and to representations of dildos in early modern texts, I contend that the handkerchief serves Desdemona as a dildo. As such, it replaces the fetish's substitutive logic—the theoretical premise that the fetish stands in for a lost object of desire—with a transitional one, enabling her sexual transition from “a maiden never bold” to “such a man” (1.3.95, 164).² Moreover, as the multiple parts of this essay may register, mobility is precisely the point. The essay's maneuvers through discourses on fetishism, pleasure, and transitional phenomena are meant to signal that the handkerchief, as a dildo, is movable, capable of fastening to the body but fundamentally detachable. It sustains what Mario DiGangi has called “the indeterminacy of ‘the sexual,’” or what I read as Desdemona's transitional sex.³ Ultimately, through the movement of the handkerchief, the play affirms not only the mutability of Desdemona's sex but also its unknowability.

Given the fact that scholars routinely link Desdemona's handkerchief to the female body, the notion of the handkerchief as a phallus, artificial or otherwise, in *Othello* may seem a dubious conjecture. Most cultural historians would likely agree that early modern handkerchiefs aided specifically in the construction of the *feminine* gender. As Ian Smith observes in a recent essay, “the overwhelming critical tendency [is] to associate the handkerchief with

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Desdemona” and her sexual anatomy.⁴ Lynda Boose, for example, famously argues that the handkerchief is “a visually recognizable reduction of Othello and Desdemona’s wedding-bed sheets, the visual proof of their consummated marriage,” in turn rendering the textile metonymic with Desdemona’s devirginized body.⁵ Following suit, Karen Newman relates the handkerchief to Desdemona’s “sexual parts—the nipples, which incidentally are sometimes represented in the courtly love blazon as strawberries, lips, and even perhaps the clitoris.”⁶ And Patricia Parker connects the handkerchief to the “dilation” of “a specifically sexual opening,” namely the vagina.⁷ Although Parker’s analysis gestures to fantastically “monstrous” female sexual parts such as those mentioned in Ambroise Paré’s *Des monstres et prodiges*, Leo Africanus’ *Geographical Historie*, and Helkiah Crooke’s *Microcosmographia*, she redirects us to an early modern female body that is incised, dissected, and ultimately penetrated by both the masculine gaze and the anatomist’s scalpel.⁸ The recuperative impulse of these feminist projects in articulating correspondences between the handkerchief and the female body is to expose the insidious inner-workings of white, imperial, European masculinity. The problem, however, is that such readings rely on a version of the female body that is fixed, with overdetermined female parts: properly situated lips, vagina, and breasts. What counts as “woman” invokes a conventionally feminine anatomy. Although these critics are acutely attentive to masculine fantasies about female bodies, they ultimately re-inscribe the fixity of the very body they seek to recover, consequently sidestepping possibilities for alternatively configured bodies that defy normative arrangement. The ways in which sex and gender are mapped onto Shakespeare’s female characters as well as the genitally male actors who portrayed them are complex and, for this reason, encourage continual critical scrutiny and reevaluation.

Scholars of early modern sexuality have recently turned their attention to the multiplicity and opacity of non-identitarian forms of sex. In the collection *Sex before Sex*, James Bromley and Will Stockton argue that “sex is a non-self-identical concept, subject to different constructions, and thus to playing different roles.”⁹ Valerie Traub notes that, in effect, sex has been raised “to the status of a question.”¹⁰ It possesses an element of decidability (or perhaps even undecidability) in the proliferation of sexual possibility in the period. This openness forces us to ask what it is we mean by “sex,” especially when early modern “sex” referred not to sexual acts but to sexual difference.¹¹ For this reason, I purposefully leave the term somewhat undefined: I want it to entangle meanings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment by suggestion rather than conclusion. This essay questions how the handkerchief transgresses its own supposed sexual meanings—its radical signficatory potential—and how it manages to activate multiple, shifting, and paradoxical meanings not only in *Othello* but also in *Othello* criticism. Jonathan Gil Harris reminds us that Desdemona’s handkerchief is “a palimpsest, a writing surface upon which multiple signs and narratives are inscribed and erased”; and “[r]ather than focus on what the handkerchief might *mean* . . . we should think also about what the handkerchief *does*—or more specifically, what is done with the handkerchief, and what couldn’t be done without it.”¹² Like Harris, I too am interested in what the

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handkerchief does, but I am equally as interested in what and especially who the handkerchief *undoes*. Mere moments before her murder at the hands of her husband, Desdemona cries, “Alas he is betrayed and I undone” (5.2.75). Her undoing conveys the fragility of identity in extremis, the contingencies of flesh, and what Judith Butler describes as “the thrall in which our relations with others hold us,” even with “others” as unwieldy as Othello or as droppable as a handkerchief. “Let’s face it,” Butler writes, “We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”¹³ The fabric cleaves to Desdemona, at first adhering to but then retreating from her touch, while it does and undoes the semiology of her sex, thereby exposing her body to violence.

At stake is Desdemona’s vulnerability, but of equal consequence is the agency of objects and the degree to which things, such as handkerchiefs, can do or undo anything at all, especially a woman’s sex. Harris envisions the napkin entering into “a diverse array of [Latourian] actor networks” where it performs multifarious labors as a love token, a receptacle for bodily fluids, and a tool for manipulation: “Work is not only done on and to the handkerchief. . . . [I]t is seemingly done also by the handkerchief itself, as when Iago—having employed mention of it to induce a seizure in Othello—remarks, ‘Work on, my medicine, work!’ (4.1.41).”¹⁴ The handkerchief also seems to work earlier in the play when Iago realizes that it “may do something” as false evidence of Desdemona’s infidelity (3.3.327). The object exercises agency in that it may or may not perform its intended labor. To not “work” is its prerogative. Object-oriented ontology might insist that there is no way of fully knowing what the handkerchief can do, that its logic is its own. “There is something that recedes—always hidden, inside, inaccessible,” Ian Bogost writes of things.¹⁵ It is this notion of withdrawal that I find so appealing in thinking about Desdemona’s sex, for if object-oriented ontology is correct in that “the term *object* enjoys a wide berth” including “corporeal and incorporeal entities . . . material objects, abstractions, objects of intentions, or anything else whatsoever,” then sex too is such an object.¹⁶ Indeed, sex in *Othello* withdraws from intelligibility, for even as much as Shakespeare’s men—Othello, Brabantio, Iago, Cassio, even the Venetian senate—crave to know the appetites and compulsions of Desdemona’s body, they cannot.

For critics, readers, and audience members alike, Desdemona has been a problematic character vacillating between virtue and vice, morality and transgression, purity and prurience. Emily Bartels confronts the fact that she has “continually eluded our critical grasp” as she “gives us, in effect, two selves to choose from.”¹⁷ This duality is due in part to her inscrutable sex. From conventionally masculine descriptions of Desdemona as a martial figure—Othello’s “fair warrior” and Cassio’s “great captain’s captain”—to her own desire to inhabit a gender contrary to her biological sex—“She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished / That heaven had made her such a man”—the play repeatedly and insistently calls her sex into question (2.1.182, 74; 1.3.163-164).¹⁸ Desdemona eludes critical capture, I argue, because she is trans. Not only is she a transvestite on the Shakespearean stage, a space already riddled with cross-dressing—male actors dressed in drag and acting like women—but, within the

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drama of the play, her gender bending flies in the face “[o]f years, of country, credit, everything” on which she had been reared (1.3.99).¹⁹ Most critics are aware that female cross-dressing is par for the course in Shakespearean drama. One need look no further than *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It* for exemplary cross-dressed women. Desdemona’s case, however, is unique. Unlike Viola cloaked as Cesario or Rosalind costumed as Ganymede, Desdemona never disguises herself in men’s clothes. Moreover, not only her gender but also her survival are contingent upon her possession of a small square of fabric which conceals within its folds the supposed truth of her sex—whether or not she slept with Cassio, whether or not she is faithful to Othello, and of course whether she is indeed “such a man” or a “maiden never bold.” The fact of the matter is that as soon as the handkerchief seems to tell the truth of her sex, it covers it up. When Emilia discovers the misplaced token and hands it over to Iago, she acknowledges that it serves as Desdemona’s “first remembrance of the Moor” (3.3.293); but when she places it in Iago’s possession, she admits, “what he will do with it / Heaven knows, not I” (3.3.298-299). While Emilia recognizes Iago’s unpredictability, she also hints that not even the character who wields the handkerchief can fully know its potential.

Fetishes

The handkerchief only appears truthful because of its ability to confer identity. Will Fisher has written brilliantly about how handkerchiefs, as accessories for the social elite in early modern England, materialized notions about the feminine gender and the female body, especially “the patriarchal ideology figuring women as ‘leaky’ vessels” and therefore as sexually incontinent.²⁰ Iago exploits this pseudoscientific association to manufacture Desdemona’s promiscuity—an “impudent strumpet” and “cunning whore” to borrow Othello’s insults (4.2.82, 91)—because the handkerchief is coextensive with her body, not just the way in which it collects her bodily fluids, but also how it stretches her body into the social world. It is a love token gifted in courtship, a contemporary fashion, and a repository for sweat, mucous, saliva, and maybe even blood—if not Desdemona’s then at least the mummified fluids of “maiden’s hearts” with which it was dyed (3.4.77)—teasing “the border between the courteous and the carnal, the sacred and the profane.”²¹ Peter Stallybrass and Rosalind Jones claim that such “detachable parts” are fetish objects that also double as “external organs of the body.”²² If the handkerchief as a fetish indeed acts as an external organ, then to which part of the body does it refer? And to whom does this body part belong? Fisher convincingly argues for a “link between the handkerchief and the hand,” but the primary critical trend has been to attribute the handkerchief to Desdemona’s reproductive organs.²³

In contrast to these approaches, psychoanalytic theories of the fetish lead us to the penis or, more precisely, the substitute penis. Others before me have of course theorized the handkerchief’s phallic role within the play’s Oedipal

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schema. In *The Tragic Effect*, André Green first identifies Shakespeare's "two-hundred-year-old seamstress" as a "phallic mother," whose handiwork emblemizes "the Moor's desire for his [own] mother," and then refers to the handkerchief as a "phallic emblem" that, when lost, renders Desdemona "a castrated woman."²⁴ In similar fashion, Peter Rudnytsky reads Othello's "It is the cause" speech inaugurating the play's final scene—Othello says "it is the cause" three times without naming said "cause"—by connecting "[t]he word 'cause,' derived etymologically from the Latin *causa*," to its French cognate *chose* which then "returns us to that Freudian 'thing,' the absent yet indispensable phallus."²⁵

The fetish as a substitute penis, while perhaps a worthwhile heuristic with which to approach Shakespeare's *Othello*, seems almost too convenient a conceptual paradigm with which to read the handkerchief as a dildo. In fact, a logic of substitution—fetish to substitute penis to dildo—oversimplifies the complex relationship that entangles them. The fetish and the dildo, which are nearly synonymous in our present moment, might be better understood during the early modern period in terms of their separate though parallel histories as cultural imports. Natasha Korda has performed much of the intellectual and archival labor connecting the handkerchief to "a much broader cultural discourse of fetishism" emerging on the West African coast during the early modern period, while critiquing earlier critical attempts to describe the handkerchief as a fetish:

My difficulty with previous invocations of the term "fetish" in *Othello* criticism is that they tend to recycle the commonplaces of fetish-discourse, rather than analyzing them critically. [. . .] My second objection to such readings is that they tend to ignore or negate the domestic status of the strawberries or, indeed, of the handkerchief itself, resisting the notion that the handkerchief might simultaneously be both "an amulet" or fetish and a "bit of linen."²⁶

William Pietz also complains that "psychological universalists subsume fetish to an allegedly universal human tendency toward privileging phallic symbolism" that occults the cultural and historical specificity of the fetish.²⁷ "The earliest fetish discourse," he counters, did not concern the phallus as much as it did "witchcraft and the control of female sexuality," which are, incidentally, identical anxieties surrounding Othello and Desdemona's elopement. Brabantio opines:

She is abused . . . and corrupted
By spells and medicine brought of mountebanks;
For nature preposterously to err
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense
Sans witchcraft could not. (1.3.60-65)

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Pietz instead locates the origin of *fetish* in the “cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” He considers, more precisely, “a novel social formation during this period through the development of the pidgin word *fetisso*.”²⁸ Put another way, *fetish* might be understood as an attempt at translation, the failure to transvaluate between “radically different social systems” or, specifically, between the triangulated points of “Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist social systems.”²⁹

Following the Catholic Portuguese, Protestant nations including Shakespeare’s England and the Netherlands commenced exploration of the West African Coast. The Dutch traveller Pieter de Marees introduced *fetisso* as a theological concept in his travelogue a year or so before *Othello*’s first documented performance at Whitehall in 1604. For Marees, *fetisso* designates a Guinean artifact, usually made of natural materials—wood, stones, shells—elevated to the status of deity. James Kearney remarks on the fetish’s ambiguous ontology in “The Book and the Fetish: The Materiality of Prospero’s Text”: “From Maree’s account, it is unclear whether the fetisso is simply the Guinean god that manifests itself through the use of the ‘man made objects’ that are also called fetissos, or if these ‘amulets’ are themselves worshipped as gods.”³⁰ It is this connection to the African occult that produces the handkerchief as such a fetish, a concept with which Shakespeare might have been familiar as it circulated both in England and on the continent during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Its African provenance, however, is a source of contention. The ontological uncertainty that Kearney observes is further complicated by the object’s ancestral indeterminacy, as *Othello* offers conflicting accounts of its origin. On the one hand, he insists, “It was a handkerchief, an antique token / My father gave my mother” (5.2.214-15). Then, on the other, he claims a more exotic heritage:

The handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
‘Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love. (3.4.58-63)

Sewn by a sibyl and gifted to *Othello*’s mother by a charmer, the handkerchief emerges not as a deity for worship as in de Maree’s account, but instead as a religio-erotic lure, a venerable sex toy of sorts. The handkerchief’s magic enables *Othello*’s mother to “subdue” her husband, a sharp departure from its more traditional uses in early modern English culture as a civilizing instrument as well as an unorthodox reversal of sexual power that disorders conventional gender relations. When Fisher points out that “the item itself might be seen as a ‘disciplinary apparatus,’” however, he refers to a different sort of sexual domination. He argues that the handkerchief “provides a means of keeping women’s bodies ‘dry’ and within the [implicitly masculine] limits set by a

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norm.”³¹ As such, the handkerchief might be bound up with what Gail Kern Paster has shown was an emergent cultural and medical discourse concerned with “women’s bodily self-control” (or the lack thereof), an anxiety that had been “naturalized” by Galenism and the “conventional Renaissance association of women and water.”³² Even so, Othello’s mother shows that discipline goes both ways as long as she maintains possession of the handkerchief: “[I]f she lost it / Or made a gift of it, [Othello’s] father’s eye / Should hold her loathed” (3.4.62-4).

Coincident with Shakespeare’s composition of *Othello*, an incipient racist discourse circulated narratives of masculine, African women subduing their husbands like wives. Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton observe that “as European encounters with the non-European world widened, older tropes about particular places were reiterated and recirculated, to new and diverse effects.”³³ Fantasies about African gender reversal, they note, date back to *The Histories* of Herodotus in which one famous account imagines Egyptian women who “make water standing” and men who not only “remain at home and play the good housewives” but also urinate by “crouching down and covering to the ground.”³⁴ Africanus, a Moroccan-born Catholic convert who lived and wrote in sixteenth-century Italy, writes about Ethiopian wives who forced their husbands into domestic labor: “These women are ambitious and proud, that all of them disdain either to spin or play the cooks: wherefore their husbands are constrained to buy victuals.”³⁵ The English traveler George Sandys likewise describes Egyptian women who bend their husbands to their wills: “[T]he women too fine fingered to meddle with housewifery, who ride abroad upon pleasure on easy-going asses, and tie their husbands to the benevolence that is due.”³⁶ Both continental and domestic sources marshal classical tropes of African gender reversal into a ripening concept of modern race.

Dildos and Delight

While *Othello* is in conversation with these accounts, the play is also distinct from them in that the gender reversal—or what I refer to as transition—is potentiated by the fetish. Korda observes that Othello, whose “use of occult terminology . . . is also strongly evocative of the discourse of fetishism,” coaxes Desdemona to value the handkerchief in such a way that recalls “European travelers’ descriptions of West African fetish worship,” especially in his “insistence that the object be worn about Desdemona’s body at all times, and that it be adored.”³⁷ Adore it she does, for as Emilia notes, “[S]he so loves the token / . . . That she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to” (3.3.297, 299-300). To make sense of the handkerchief, in other words, we might return to Fisher’s claim that Desdemona “treats the object as if it were . . . a doll,” less so as *juju*, a term for an African charm, and more so as *jou jou*, the French diminutive for “toy.”³⁸ In fact, the handkerchief suggests a different type of “toy” or, more specifically, a different type of “attachment”—a “strap-on”—for

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as Norbert Elias states in his *History of Manners*, handkerchiefs were worn “hanging from the lady’s girdle.”³⁹ This statement anticipates Liza Blake’s argument that, much like handkerchiefs, sixteenth and seventeenth-century dildos primarily functioned as bodily accessories.⁴⁰

But if the handkerchief acts as a kind of fashionable pleasure device that Desdemona can attach and detach, it functions as more than just an artificial phallus. “[E]ven if the dildo began as a representation of the penis,” Blake writes, “it survived in a way the codpiece did not because dildos and strap-ons, almost as soon as they emerged, ceased to directly refer to or represent a bodily organ *and the ideologies supporting it*, and acquired a life of their own as functional objects and luxury commodities.”⁴¹ Most perplexing about this transition from penile proxy to accessory is the semantic evolution of the early modern dildo—that is, the way in which it initially references the body part it intends to simulate only then to surrender that association in favor of a logic of accessorization. My point is that the dildo, as an emergent concept in early modern England, had not yet accrued nor concretized a stable set of meanings and instead circulated as a polysemous term evocative of, though not absolutely signifying, the penis.

Dictionaries from the period vary in this regard. John Florio’s 1598 Italian-English lexicon, *A Worlde of Wordes*, describes the dildo as a *pastinaca muranese* or, in English, a “glass parsnip.”⁴² Florio’s *pastinaca* likely alludes to Aretino’s *Ragionamento* in which a fruit basket delivered to a convent is found to contain “glass fruits made in Murano . . . shaped like a man’s testimonials.”⁴³ Linda Wolk-Simon tells us that parsnips, “as they were understood in the Renaissance,” could function as “metaphor[s] for phalli of flesh” but were also “the contents of the woman’s basket,” a symbol of both sex and domesticity. Such fruit, she argues, “resonated with lewd, carnal, and preeminently homoerotic associations.”⁴⁴ Florio’s definition of the dildo as a vitreous root vegetable differs markedly from that of Elisha Coles’s *English Dictionary*, which defines it as a “penis succedaneus.”⁴⁵ “Succedaneus,” meaning “substitute,” stems from the Latin *succedere* meaning to “come close after.” Unlike Florio’s metaphorical and highly allusive *pastinaca muranese*, Coles’s Latinate dildo signifies that which *follows* the penis—nonidentical yet proximate—and surrogates the original’s purpose.

The earliest, non-dictionary mention of the “dildo” in English literature seems to embrace both dictionary definitions. Thomas Nashe’s erotic poem “The Choise of Valentines,” popularly known as “Nashe’s Dildo” or in manuscript as “Nash his Dildo,” narrates how the mistress Francis abandons lovemaking with the comically “premature” Tomalin in favor of prosthetic recreation, preferring her “little dildo” made of “thick congealed glasse” to her “too-soone” john: “it played at peacock twixt [her] leggs” while guaranteeing to “neuer make [her] belly swell” with child (II.275, 243, 246).⁴⁶ “Stiff” as if it “were made of steele,” Francis’ dildo serves as a source of female pleasure, managing to mimic select functions of a biological penis while conveniently lacking its reproductive ones (242). Nashe describes it as “nourish’t with whott water or with milk” and having one ejaculatory “eye” that “fervently doeth raigne” (II.274, 270-71), which Blake connects to the historical “practice of filling dildos

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with warm milk to simulate erection or ejaculation.”⁴⁷ Nashe’s artificial penis strives, at least partially, for both penile form and function while serving as an accessory—in the legal sense as well as the fashionable—to Francis’ sexuality.⁴⁸ Traub goes so far to say that “throughout the poem, the dildo functions as a fetish,” and that “[b]oth the dildo and the poem itself function as substitutes for a lost object of desire, the all-powerful penis.”⁴⁹

While the dildo’s succedaneous meanings were legible to those culturally savvy enough to be “in the know,” the *OED* insists that the word itself is “of obscure origin” with similarly obscure meanings. It cites an early theatrical appearance in Act 4 of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, when the servant announces the entrance of Autolycus: “He has the prettiest love songs for maids, so without bawdry, which is strange, with such delicate burdens of dildos and fadings, ‘jump her and thump her’” (4.4.193-97).⁵⁰ By claiming that the songs are “without bawdry” but then obscenely lyricizing the “thumping” and “jumping” of a maid, the servant puns on the bawdiness of balladry. The “dildo” here, however, does not explicitly signify a *penis succedaneous* but instead becomes risqué by context. Blake confirms, “In the ballad tradition, well into the seventeenth century, the word ‘dildo’ sometimes bears no meaning at all” and is not so different from “hey nonny, nonny” or “hey nonino” popularized by Shakespeare in comedies like *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*.⁵¹

In an anonymously composed seventeenth-century ballad attributed to Jack o’ Lent, Tudor and Jacobean England’s famed straw man, the unnamed balladeer uses a “dildo” not only as a nonsensical metrical device—“With a dildo, dildo, dildo, / With a dildo, dildo, dee” (5-6)—but also as a “long thing” that calls the female protagonist’s sex into question: “Some say ’twas a man, but it was a woman” (11, 7).⁵² When she climbs upon a high-strung rope, “Knights and gentlemen / Of low and high degree . . . cast up fleering eyes / All underneath her cloaths” to discern her “true” sex (15-16, 22-23). To their dismay, her “linen hose” preserve the mystery. Not only does Jack o’ Lent’s dildo humorously complicate the fixity of the dual sex binary, but it also realizes possibilities of transsexuality, prosthetic embodiment, and the cloaked unknowability of sex concealed behind fabric.

Dildos were not limited to the ballad tradition. Prose texts from the period also contributed to the term’s polysemy and shifting provenance. Travelogues especially demonstrate how the dildo was in transit during the early modern period as its ability to cross national and linguistic borders paralleled its ability to breach the boundaries of the body. Blake discusses William Dampier’s *A new voyage round the world*, which references cactus-like “Dildo-bushes” and “Dildo-trees” as “big as a mans [sic] Leg” and “prickly.”⁵³ In another seventeenth-century travelogue, John Fryer describes sexually inordinate natives dancing and beating “Brass Pots with a great Shout” around a dildo erected upon an altar. He even mentions “jougies,” ceremonialists who presided over the dildo-centric ritual and a term that provides a semiotic link from *juju* to *jou jou*. The dildo’s French connection might be unsurprising considering early modern English attitudes toward their ribald European neighbor. The early eighteenth-century long poem “Monsieur Thing’s Origin, or Signor D—o’s Adventures in

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Britain” goes so far to suggest that the dildo was not an Italian invention but instead a French one, a claim corroborated by a seventeenth-century religious pamphlet entitled *The Character of a town-misse*, warning London’s bachelors of a young *fille de joie* with “skin . . . cleerer than her conscience” and who travels about town with a “box of teeth,” a “Blackmore,” “a little dog,” and “a *French Merchant* to supply her with *Dildo’s*.”⁵⁴ A cultural import of ambiguous origins, the dildo’s meanings were complicated by contested ties to the Italians and the French, continental foes threatening to pollute English fantasies of national purity. Domestic anxieties surrounding “foreign” dildos were symptomatic of what Newman describes as a “xenophobic English view of exotic and commercial practices and their fruits.”⁵⁵

Such strange fruits nonetheless found their way onto the English stage, where dildos performed even more ambiguous, though no less sexually suggestive functions. John Marston’s *Antonio and Mellida* (1601) features Dildo, the wise-cracking manservant and sidekick to Balurdo, who finds his comedic counterpart in Castilio’s page, Cazzo, whose name of course is slang for “penis” in Italian. Ben Jonson’s unusual reference to a dildo in *The Alchemist* (1609) is also noteworthy. At the play’s end, Subtle’s alchemical laboratory is revealed for what it really is in Lovewit’s reaction to his wrecked home:

Here, I find
The empty walls worse than I left them, smoked,
A few cracked pots and glasses, and a furnace;
The ceiling fill’d with poesies of the candle,
And madam with a dildo writ o’ the walls.⁵⁶ (5.5.38-42)

The ramshackle laboratory emblemizes the play’s primary deception (the fantasy of transmuting objects into precious metals), and Jonson uses a dildo to drive that point home by further profaning an already debased scene. Juliet Fleming argues that the dildo “writ o’ the walls” is a form of early modern graffiti:

‘Poesies of the candle,’ usually glossed as stains caused by candle smoke, can also mean . . . verses, slogans, or signatures written on the ceiling in candle smoke: additions to the word Madam, and the drawing of a dildo—or alternatively to the text of a ballad called “Madam with a dildo,” or to a portrait of a woman with a dildo—that have already been written on Lovewit’s walls.⁵⁷

In Jonson’s play text, it is unclear whether the dildo is written or pictorialized, but much like Shakespeare’s and Marston’s dildos, Jonson’s is purely referential. The object itself fails to appear on stage and exists only as a vandalized representation, smeared in the blackened scrawls of a burnt candle which the audience never sees.⁵⁸

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What then does it mean to discover a dildo in a play that makes no explicit mention of it? Better yet, if the meanings of early modern dildos were in flux, and if dildos don't always resemble a penis, then how do we know when we have come across one? In the case of *Othello*, I suggest taking our cue from the contemporary lesbian dildo debate. Heather Findlay identifies two oppositional camps: those lesbians who "have debunked the dildo and its notorious cousin the strap-on [by] calling them 'male-identified'" against others who "have argued that dildos do not represent penises; rather, they are sex toys that have an authentic place in the history of lesbian subculture."⁵⁹ At stake is the gendering of the dildo that comes to bear the social wrongs of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia at the hands of violent masculinity. "Whether they know it or not," Shari Thurer argues:

[T]he any-shaped-dildo-will-do lesbians are making a case for queer theory. By arguing that dildos, irrespective of their appearance, are gender neutral, that their meaning is in the eye of the beholder, they are affirming the postmodern idea that meaning is unstable. By calling into question the gender quotient of even such an apparently straightforward item as a lifelike dildo, they are demonstrating the arbitrary and constructed nature of our pleasure.⁶⁰ (56)

Following Thurer, I contend that dildos have the potential to upend binary organizations of gender and allow us to explore questions of sexual pleasure and the instances when pleasure (and the *choice* to partake in pleasurable acts) is put under pressure. As it happens, the word "dildo" phonetically gestures to one of its possible roots, *diletto*, Italian for "pleasure" or, more precisely, "delight." The word "delight" occurs three times in *Othello*—five if you include "delighted"—with each mention concerning implicitly or explicitly Desdemona's sexuality and capacities for pleasure. The first appears in Iago's plan to bait Brabantio with news of his daughter's disappearance: "Rouse him: make after him, poison his delight" (1.1.67). The "poison" spoiling Brabantio's "delight," we come to learn, is Desdemona's elopement, exaggerated by Iago to incite patriarchal anxiety about interracial sex. The second mention of the word is in Brabantio's inquisition of his daughter's rejection of the "wealthy curled darlings of our nation" and her shocking preference for "the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as [Othello]"—a thing "to fear, not to delight" (1.2.68, 70-71). Brabantio's strife becomes the onus of Venice's politics as all are forced to question how the well-bred daughter of a European nobleman could not only prefer but also take pleasure in a dark-skinned "thing."⁶¹ The objectification of Othello's somatic color further exoticizes the pleasure Desdemona experiences through her perverse attachment to "things."

A third mention of Desdemona's "delight" comes in reference to her ocular pleasure or, according to Iago, her lack thereof in *looking* upon Othello. The villain fumes, "Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look

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on the devil” who is “defective” in “manners and beauties” (2.1.223-24, 227-28). The critical problem for Iago is that Desdemona *does* in fact take pleasure in the Moor’s image: “I *saw* Othello’s visage in his mind, / And to his honor and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (1.3.253-55, emphasis mine). Desdemona’s desire shades toward the sacred in her devotion to Othello’s “parts.” Delight in Shakespeare’s play centers not only around her sexual pleasure but also the “parts” to which she commits herself. After she loses the handkerchief, however, she fears that Othello believes her “parts” —her eyes, ears, and other sensory organs—may have betrayed their marriage:

If e’er my will did trespass ‘gainst his love
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,
Or that mine eyes, mine ears or any sense
Delighted in any other form . . .
Comfort forswear me! (4.2.154-57, 161)

Diletto, in *Othello*, is so deeply woven into the handkerchief that its disappearance forecloses possibilities for further pleasure. It is in these moments where delight produces anxiety that the seams of sexual identity come undone, and sex becomes an uncertainty. Iago is fully aware of the implications and manipulates this indeterminacy to deprive Desdemona of sexual agency—her right to express her own sexuality—and to convince Othello of her adulterous intentions: “Look to your wife . . . / In Venice they do let God see the pranks, / They dare not show their husbands” (3.3.212, 217-19). Iago knows that Desdemona’s sex is “keep’t unknown,” so he effectively transfers Brabantio’s anxiety over a disobedient daughter to Othello’s insecurity over an unfaithful wife: “She did deceive her father, marrying you, / And when she seemed to shake, and fear your looks, / She loved them most” (3.3.209-211). Desdemona’s talent for “[giving] out such a seeming” works against her (3.3.212).⁶²

Making Do

Shakespeare centers the drama of *Othello* around a body that transitions from “with” to “without.” Desdemona first possesses but is soon dispossessed of her handkerchief, an item that, I propose, might be reread as a transitional object, though not strictly in the psychoanalytic sense. Newman criticizes the “psychoanalytic scenario” for its phallogocentrism and the ways in which “it privileges a male scopic drama, casting the woman as other, as a failed man, thereby effacing her difference and concealing her sexual specificity behind the fetish.”⁶³ For a woman like Desdemona, however, “sexual specificity” is not so much erased by the fetish as it is constituted with it. That is, the woman equipped with a dildo is neither a “failed man” nor properly a “woman,” but something else that obliterates all notions that sex and gender are pure and fixed, male or female, on the Shakespearean stage. In fact, psychoanalytic theories of

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fetish, despite their ostensible ambivalence to important concerns of feminist and queer politics, can provide a distinct structural model by which to understand not only the transitional functions of dildos in early modern England but also the dynamic permutations of sex and gender in *Othello*. The remainder of this essay configures a concept of transitional sex—specifically Desdemona's—with reference not to Freud's but to D.W. Winnicott's theory of fetish and transitional phenomena: intermediary processes through which an individual comes to terms with external reality through interactions with a particular and very personal thing, referred to by Winnicott as a “transitional object.”⁶⁴ My intention is to repurpose Winnicott's theory of infantile development to a more capacious understanding of sexual transition that occurs in cooperation with an object.

Most infants, he argues, first differentiate “inner reality” from “external life” through a primary relationship with an outside object.⁶⁵ He tells us that the object of choice is typically a fabric—a blanket, napkin, or even a handkerchief—frequently “held and sucked.”⁶⁶ Thinking between a binarized psychosomatic “inside” and “outside,” he offers a third alternative akin to Melanie Klein's theorization of the “internal object”: an experiential process through which a subject transitions from one psychic state to another, an ongoing task of “making do” with the transitional object as s/he engages “the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate but interrelated.”⁶⁷ He describes this interlacing of self and other as an act of weaving, human and thing spun together in psychosomatic development. Furthermore, he adds, “The transitional object may eventually develop into a fetish and so persist as a characteristic of the adult sexual life,” which suggests that transitional phenomena might be brought to bear upon a theorization of erotic attachment that extends beyond infant object relationships and toward a concept of fetishistic sexuality.⁶⁸ Specifically, Winnicott's theory provides a framework with which to consider the ins and outs—the suturing of self with an object and the exteriorization of inwardness—of sexual transition. Transitioning with a transitional object might therefore be thought outside developmental psychoanalysis and extended to discussions of the psychosomatic as well as cultural processes of materializing a gender incongruent with one's birth sex.

Transpersons express their gendered and sexual identities in myriad ways. Some prefer body modification through surgical, pharmacological, or artistic means. Others favor fashion, cosmetics, performance, or any combination of the above. The paraphernalia with which a person transitions might be characterized as “transitional” in that these objects visually, materially and cognitively move the body as well as conceptions of self across gendered and/or sexual boundaries. In this regard, dildos are transitional objects that serve a very real and practical function for transitioning people. For example, transmen might “pack” their pants to simulate the appearance of a penis, make use of a stand-to-pee device for urination, or adhere an oblong appendage for sexual penetration. For those who choose such means, dildos may help support the task of transitioning by shifting embodied experience and by expanding the body's capacities to signify. For Desdemona, the handkerchief is a transitional object.

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Not only does it transition her from a brave rebellion against her father in her decision to “love the Moor to live with him” to an endangered state of fatal precarity with the object’s disappearance (1.3.249). It also enables her gendered and performative movement from feminine to masculine and back again. The handkerchief achieves a transitional ontology in that it sometimes integrates with her body and *becomes* her—in both senses of the word—while at others, never exceeds its most basic thinghood.⁶⁹

Desdemona’s transition, however, is not just about “making do” with her sex; it’s also about survival. The most pivotal moment in the play occurs between two brackets, a mere editorial stage direction—“*[She drops her handkerchief]*” (3.3.291)—when her fate is decided and when, as Bartels commiserates, she “seems to fall apart at the seams and slide into fatal passivity.”⁷⁰ Displacing erotic codes from within a dominant system of masculine intelligibility, Shakespeare’s “fair warrior” encounters violence because of her *perceived* sex. Lost and found by Iago, the handkerchief no longer empowers Desdemona’s transition but instead “speaks against her” innocence (3.4.441). Written over with Iago’s false narrative of adulterous sex, the palimpsestic fabric issues her death penalty. A number of archival sources confirm that dildos “emerged into legal visibility in the early modern period” and that “women could be tried for sodomy,” although Desdemona’s case seems different from these.⁷¹ Transitioning, for Desdemona, is about surviving the dangers of queer womanhood in Shakespeare’s Venice but, in the end, coming undone. The very real and present danger of transitioning is the misreading or the very *inability to read* in the first place transitional sex.

The challenges to reading and to normative conceptions of sexuality posed by Desdemona’s handkerchief might become clearer when we bear in mind another historical moment in which a handkerchief might signify a dildo. Popularized during the 1970s in urban centers across the United States, especially in San Francisco’s Castro District, the handkerchief (“hanky”) code was a system employed by queer men and casual sex-seekers alike to signal to like-minded individuals specific sexual preferences and fetishes.⁷² The handkerchief’s color, pattern, and position—usually worn in the back pocket of one’s blue jeans or tucked into a belt loop—served as sartorial clues to one’s perverse proclivities without having to verbalize or negotiate them in a noisy bar or through a potentially awkward encounter. Either you’re into it or you’re not. The code, however, is complex and requires an adequate degree of back-street literacy to decipher. For instance, a black handkerchief worn on the right identifies a “bottom” into sadomasochism, while a black and white striped handkerchief on the left indicates a preference for a black “top.” A purple flannel or gingham signals a penchant for sex with a transperson and, perhaps most applicable to this essay, a pink handkerchief for dildos. With hundreds of possible combinations, the hanky code is difficult to master and, because of its sheer plenitude, sometimes fails to precisely communicate its intended meanings. Some kinky individuals may even wear multiple handkerchiefs at once to express numerous fetishes. Due to this codified intricacy, the truth of one’s sex might be lost in the fabric. At the very least, however, a handkerchief of any color, pattern,

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or position indicates a preference for unconventional sex, even if that sex is ultimately unknowable.

I reference the hanky code not only to link Shakespeare's handkerchief to a modern sexual subculture of handkerchiefs but also to make the point that Desdemona's dildo is not so much about "figuring out" the operations of sex and gender in *Othello* or even about discovering the "actual" dildo within the text. Rather, this is about unsettling the ways in which we approach Shakespeare's play and finding new ways to talk about sex—critical readings that admit their absolute contingency and apprehend the tantalizing elusiveness of sex on the early modern stage. Rather than confine Desdemona to the locked house of categorical identity, we might instead let her and her dildo "undo" our proclivities toward easy paradigms of sex and gender in our political criticism. Like Desdemona, we as readers and meaning-makers depend on our handkerchiefs, these "trifles light as air" (3.3.325).

Notes

1. "Pilot Episode," *Are You Being Served?*, The British Broadcasting Corporation, 8 September 1972. *Are You Being Served?* is a BBC television sitcom written by Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft and which aired during the 1970s and 1980s.
2. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3rd ed., ed. E.A.J. Honigmann. (Bloomsbury: New York, 1997).
3. Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11.
4. Ian Smith, "Othello's Black Handkerchief," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64 (2013): 3.
5. Lynda Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief: The Recognizance and Pledge of Love," *English Literary Renaissance* 5 (1975): 363.
6. Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethop white': femininity and the monstrous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in history and ideology*, ed. Jean Howard and Marion O'Connor (New York: Routledge, 1987), 156.
7. Patricia Parker, "Africa, *Othello* and Bringing to Light," *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Parker (New York: Routledge, 1994), 92.
8. Parker links representations of female monstrosity in travelogues, including Pory's English translation of Africanus, to scientific descriptions of women's "hidden" sexuality in anatomy texts, such as Paré's and Crooke's, to an incipient colonial desire to "discover" and thereby possess secret worlds beyond the European horizon.
9. Will Stockton and James M. Bromley, "Introduction: Figuring Early Modern Sex," *Sex before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England*, ed. Bromley and Stockton (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 4.
10. Valerie Traub, "Afterword," *Sex After Sex*, ed. Bromley and Stockton, 303.
11. Stockton and Bromley, "Introduction," 11.
12. Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 180.
13. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 23.
14. Harris, *Untimely Matter*, 176.

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15. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 6.
16. Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 12.
17. Emily Bartels, "Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess and the Assertion of Desire," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36.2 (1996): 423.
18. Joan Holmer has argued for Desdemona's masculinity insofar as she "wants to brave the dangers of both journey and war," especially in her dogged insistence to accompany Othello to the Cyprian warzone (138). Holmer further observes, "For only one other female character in his works does Shakespeare employ the descriptive term "warrior," predictably for the Amazon Hippolyta" (132). Joan Ozark Holmer, "Desdemona, Woman Warrior: 'O, these men, these men! (4.3.49)," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 17 (2005): 132-164.
19. For more on cross-dressing, see Jean Howard, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.4 (1988): 418-440; and David Cressy, "Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 35.4 (1996): 438-465.
20. Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 44.
21. Fisher, *Materializing Gender*, 48.
22. Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, "Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 116.
23. Fisher, *Materializing Gender*, 38.
24. André Green, *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 99-100, 110.
25. Peter Rudnytsky, "The Purloined Handkerchief in *Othello*," *The Psychoanalytic Study of Literature*, ed. Joseph Reppen and Maurice Charney (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1985), 186.
26. Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 125-26.
27. William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985), 6.
28. Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," 5.
29. Pietz emphasizes the ways in which the fetish complicates the boundary between person and thing. He tells us that the truth of the fetish "is experienced as a substantial movement from inside the self . . . into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space outside" ("Fetish I," 11-12). This phenomenon is a crisis of the self: a singular encounter in which the identity of the self is called into question by its relation to an object exteriorized from the self.
30. James Kearney, "The Book and the Fetish: The Materiality of Prospero's Text," *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies* 32.3 (2002): 438.
31. Fisher, *Materializing Gender*, 41.
32. Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Discipline of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 25. Upon discovering that Desdemona has lost her handkerchief and may have violated her wedding vows, Othello characterizes her as a "[h]ot, hot, and moist . . . young and sweating devil," whose corporeal excess must be contained through "[m]uch castigation, [and] exercise devout" (3.2.32, 36).
33. Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton, "Introduction," *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion*, ed. Loomba and Burton (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 18.
34. Herodotus, "The famous history of Herodotus," in *Race in Early Modern England*, ed. Loomba and Burton, 40.
35. Johannes Leo Africanus. "A geographical historie of Africa . . ." in *Race in Early Modern England*, ed. Loomba and Burton, 157.
36. George Sandys, *A Relation of a journey begun an: Dom: 1610. Purchas his Pilgrimes in Five Bookes*, in *Race in Early Modern England*, ed. Loomba and Burton, 192.
37. Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, 128.
38. Fisher, *Materializing Gender*, 54.

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39. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process, Vol 1: The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 145.
40. Liza Blake, "Dildos and Accessories: The Functions of Early Modern Strap-Ons," *Ornamentalism: The Art of Renaissance Accessories*, ed. Bella Mirabella (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 130-155.
41. Blake, "Dildos and Accessories," 134.
42. John Florio, *A worlde of wordes, or most copious, and exact dictionarie in Italian and English* (London: A. Hatfield for E. Blount, 1598), 261.
43. Linda Wolk-Simon, "Profane Love in the Renaissance," *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Andrea Baye (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 53.
44. The glass parsnip's eroticism was further elaborated by the historical practice of crafting dildos from Murano, a decorative style of luxury glassware associated with the Venetian island of the same name. In *Cultural Capitals: Early Modern London and Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), Karen Newman argues that early modern English authors would have been familiar with these glass commodities not only from Aretino's dialogues but also from the metropolitan marketplace where a glass dildo was "a marker of a certain urban and mercantile sophistication," especially in cities like London: "We know that Murano glass objects were imported to England as early as the fourteenth century. In 1549 a group of Muranese glassmakers settled in London and produced Venetian glass for several years, and in 1571, a Muranese glassmaker named Jacopo Verzelini . . . received a royal patent to produce Murano glass, brought additional recruits from Italy, and manufactured Venetian glass in London for at least fifteen years" (143).
45. Elisha Coles, *An English dictionary explaining the difficult terms . . .* (London: Peter Parker, 1677), sig. DI.
46. Thomas Nashe, "The choise of valentines," *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse: 1509-1659*, ed. H.R. Woudhuysen (London: Penguin, 1992), 253-263.
47. Blake, "Dildos and Accessories," 133. Blake also cites "Monsieur Thing's Origin: or, Seignor D—o's Adventures in Britain" in which the speaker insists that dildos "[c]an spout so pleasing, betwixt wind and water, / Warm milk, or any other liquid softer" (199-200). See *Secret Sexualities: A Sourcebook of 17th and 18th Century Writing*, ed. Ian McCormick (London: Routledge, 1997), 198-202.
48. Blake affirms that Nashe's "dildo takes on a life of its own . . . in that the poem seems to award an equal ontological status to the dildo and the to the woman who uses it. One is not necessarily subordinate to the other, and one does not represent the other; rather, they join in the poem as accessories in pleasure" ("Dildos and Accessories," 45).
49. Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98. Traub performs provocative readings of dildos, tribades, and enlarged clitorises in early modern literature by way of the Derridean supplement to explore the ways in which female desires are inscribed and effaced from within a patriarchal culture anxious about female sexuality. See especially 196-197.
50. William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
51. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, "Hey nonny, nonny" ends a verse of Balthasar's song famous for its first line, "Sigh no more ladies" (3.2.68, 60), and "hey nonino" appears as a refrain to the song "It was a lover and his lass" from *As You Like It* (5.3.15-32). (I cite in each case to William Shakespeare, *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Orgel and A.R. Braunmuller [New York: Penguin, 2002].) In fact, it may have been the famed Elizabethan composer and rumored Shakespearean collaborator Thomas Morley—and not Shakespeare himself—responsible for those nonnies, noninos, and dildos. Evidence points to his song "Will You Buy a Fine Dog?" (1600) that opens with a peculiar question, "Will you buy a fine dog with a hole in its head?" He follows his comical inquiry with a series of arpeggiated "dildos" only then to insist that he "stand[s] not" on fashions such as "periwigs, combs, glasses, gloves, garters, girdles, busks" but instead prefers "other dainty tricks" like "sleek stones and potting sticks" (5-8). Morley's dildos act as

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pranksters doubling as metrical filler to complete the measure. The dildos accessorize both the lyric and the body as stylistic choices that layer multiple possibilities for interpretation: nonsensical sound, an artificial penis, or perhaps even an *actual* penis. Morley's "dog with a hole in its head" may find its slang counterpart in zoographic metaphors for male genitalia such as "cock" or "one-eyed snake." See *The First Booke of Ayres or Little Short Songs* (London: H. Ballard for William Barley, 1600), 17.

52. All lines refer to "A Song," *Choyce Drollery: Songs & Sonnets. Being a Collection of Diverse Excellent Pieces of Poetry of Several Eminent Authors*, ed. J Woodfall Ebsworth (London: Printed by J.G. for Robert Pollard, 1656), 31.

53. William Dampier, *A new voyage round the world . . .* (London: Printed for James Knapton, 1697), 81, 93.

54. *The Character of a Town-Miss* (London: Printed for Rowland Reynolds in the Strand, 1680), 3. Regarding the dildo's emergence, "Monsieur Thing's Origin" reads, "From Italy it was that first it came, / And from that country it had first its name, / But if my information is but true . . . To France he owes his birth" (7-9, 11). It should also be noted that the poem's dildo is personified as "Monsieur Thing," teasing the border between the human and the nonhuman.

55. Newman, *Cultural Capitals*, 144.

56. Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, in *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques*, ed. Richard Harp (New York: Norton, 2001), 176-274.

57. Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 54.

58. Other examples exist in seventeenth-century drama, including Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1630) when Allwit rejoices "La dildo, dildo la dildo, la dildo dildo de dildo" (1.2.57) in unloading the financial burden of his family on Sir Walter in exchange for intercourse with his wife. His exuberant "dildos" might be chalked up to nonsensical jubilation, but as readers of Middleton's comedy are well aware, innuendo is his art. Another is Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Nice Valour* (c.1615) in which the clown, Galoshio, imagines his mummified remains filling "galipots and long dildo glasses," cylindrical glassware akin to laboratory test tubes for storing mummia but also a possible pun on the glass dildo popularized by Aretino and Nashe (2.1.43). As Blake observes of yet another dildo in another English play, George Chapman's *Monsieur D'Olive* (1606), "The pleasure of the word 'dildo' comes not (or not only) from its meaning or etymology, but from its ability to occasionally not signify" ("Dildos and Accessories," 142). See Thomas Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, in *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, ed. Arthur Kinney (Malden: Blackwell, 2005) 589-636; and Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Nice Valour, The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*, ed. A.R. Waller, Vol. 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912) 143-198.

59. Heather Findlay, "Freud's 'Fetishism' and the Lesbian Dildo Debates," *Feminist Studies* 18.3 (1992): 564.

60. Shari L. Thurer, *The End of Gender: A Psychological Autopsy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 56.

61. The other "thing" in Shakespeare's play, it goes without saying, is the African handkerchief, which Smith, in his essay "Othello's Black Handkerchief," reads as a stand-in for Othello. He writes against decades of criticism that assume the handkerchief's whiteness to argue instead for the fabric's blackness, "that is, a dark color resembling Othello's skin and not the white so often presumed by commentators to point to a series of tropes connoting Desdemona's sexuality" (16). Investigating a rich history of *mumia*, dyeing practices, and early modern stagings of race, Smith suggests that the black handkerchief is metonymic not with Desdemona's white flesh but with Othello's dark skin, and that, counter to most interpretations, the textile is a "substitute for Othello," which Desdemona carries with her "[t]o kiss and to talk to" (3.3.313) as a "reminder of her black African love" (14, 20). Although Smith and I may depart on some of the finer points (as in whether the handkerchief enacts a logic of substitution or transition), I agree that the napkin also vectors Othello's corporeality, especially with regard to its matrilineal exchange from parent to child to spouse which, at some point during its transit, may signal not only Desdemona's sexual

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parts but also Othello's black penis, the very "thing" responsible for satisfying Desdemona's "delight" but "poisoning" Brabantio's.

62. The final mention of "delight" refers to Othello and comes in the Duke's farewell to Brabantio: "If virtue no delighted beauty lack / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.290-91). The Duke contrasts the virtuous connotations of whiteness against the negative associations of blackness, in effect granting Othello an exception to his somatic color.

63. Newman, "And Wash the Ethiop white," 156.

64. D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," in *Playing and Reality* (1971. New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-34.

65. To this point, Winnicott explains, "Sooner or later in an infant's development there comes a tendency on the part of the infant to weave other-than-me into the personal pattern," to then qualify, "To some extent these objects stand for the breast, but it is not especially this point that is under discussion" ("Transitional Objects," 4). It is important to note that a substitutive logic is partially at play, even if it's not Winnicott's primary focus.

66. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects," 5.

67. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects," 3.

68. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects," 12.

69. For a related argument, see Fisher's provocative proposal that "[t]here is, therefore, a sense in which the handkerchief in *Othello* is a 'prosthesis' which both is and is not a part of the body" (54). For example, when Othello commands Desdemona to "make it a darling, like your precious eye" (3.4.68), Fisher argues that "he accords the handkerchief a kind of corporeal status by linking it symbolically" to the eye and that she treats it accordingly as if it were a body part or "false limb" (54).

70. Bartels, "Strategies of Submission," 427.

71. Blake, "Dildos and Accessories," 135. Perhaps the most recognizable of these is the brief account of the transvestite from Chaumont-en-Bassigni in Michel de Montaigne's travel journal and brought to our attention by Stephen Greenblatt in "Fiction and Friction," *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 66-93. Greenblatt argues that the transvestite was not prosecuted for "deception but for the use of prohibited sexual devices, devices that enable a woman to take the part of a man" (67). As far as I am aware, there are no records of English women tried or convicted for using a dildo or strap-on; however, in her essay, Blake provides examples from Spain and France and points us to Crompton, who dispels "the myth that lesbians were considered exempt from sodomy laws in continental Europe" ("Dildos and Accessories," 148).

72. See Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 36-37; and Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 255.

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