Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) Study Guide

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) by Ann-Marie MacDonald

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The actor, playwright, and novelist Ann-Marie MacDonald has earned a reputation as one of Canada's most exciting contemporary voices. Since the production of her first solo play, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, she has become widely known and revered in the theatrical and literary world. In fact, the success of MacDonald's first play was key in identifying her as a socially conscious feminist as well as a witty writer with wide popular appeal.

First performed in Toronto in 1988, *Goodnight Desdemona* is the story of Constance Ledbelly, a quirky and absentminded academic who is writing a doctoral thesis about two of William Shakespeare's tragedies. Suddenly, Constance finds herself transported into the worlds of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, where she interferes with the plot, gets to know the characters, and discovers her true identity. With its witty allusions to late-sixteenth-century English culture, its use of Elizabethan dramatic conventions, and its playful reimagining of some of Shakespeare's most enduring characters, *Goodnight Desdemona* amuses its audience and brings the Elizabethan period to life. It also provides a thoughtful commentary on such issues as feminism, academia, Elizabethan values, and the nature of tragedy. The play was revised in 1990, and a revised paperback edition is available from Grove Press (1998).

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Canadian

Birthdate: 1956

Born on an army base in West Germany in 1956, MacDonald was the daughter of a Lebanese woman and a Canadian soldier of Scottish heritage. She grew up with two sisters and one brother in a strict Catholic family that moved several times before settling in Ottawa, Canada. MacDonald was a high-achieving student, and her parents encouraged her to study law, but instead she left Carleton University in Minnesota to attend the National Theatre School in Montreal. After graduation, MacDonald moved to Toronto and became involved in collaborative theater projects, including *This Is for You, Anna* (1984). While living in Toronto, MacDonald came out as a lesbian, and her family accepted this fact gradually.

MacDonald's writing career began with projects that included a libretto to the contemporary opera *Nigredo Hotel* (produced in 1992), but her first solo venture was *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (1990). The play won the 1990 Governor General's Award for Drama, a Chalmers Canadian Play Award, and the Canadian Authors' Association Award. Her next play, *The Arab's Mouth* (1995), is set in nineteenth-century Scotland and was less successful than her award-winning first play. During and after this period, MacDonald acted and wrote for television, film, and stage, and she also worked as a broadcast journalist.

MacDonald published her first novel, *Fall on Your Knees*, in 1996, after five years of work. The story of a family from the island of Cape Breton in Nova Scotia, it delves into the racial and cultural tension on the island in the early twentieth century and then follows one of the principal characters to the jazz scene of Harlem in New York City. The novel was well reviewed and became famous after it was chosen for Oprah Winfrey's book club. MacDonald was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. She continued to act and write after the success of her novel, appearing in the film *Better Than Chocolate* in 1999. In 2003, she published her second novel, *The Way the Crow Flies*, which is based, in part, on the case of Steven Truscott. Truscott was convicted of murder in 1959 but has campaigned to have his name cleared since he was released in 1969. As of 2005, MacDonald continued to live and work in Toronto.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Goodnight Desdemona begins with a □dumb show,□ or a scene with no sound, in which three situations occur simultaneously. Othello murders Desdemona, Juliet kills herself, and Constance Ledbelly throws a pen and a manuscript into a wastebasket.

In scene 1, Constance works on her doctoral dissertation, which claims that *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* were originally comedies written by an unknown author and that this can be proved by decoding a manuscript written by a physicist named Gustav. Her longtime crush, Professor Claude Night, comes in, criticizes her dissertation topic, and tells her that he is taking a job at Oxford University that she had hoped to secure. Constance laments her fate and begins throwing her possessions into the wastebasket until she herself is sucked into the wastebasket.

Act 2

The second act takes place on the island of Cyprus, within the world of *Othello*. During the scene where Othello resolves to kill his wife, Constance intervenes and reveals that Iago is tricking Othello. Othello binds Iago and expresses his gratitude to Constance. Desdemona arrives and asks whether Constance may stay with them. Othello tells Constance not to make known to Desdemona that he was jealous of his wife. Constance asks Desdemona for help in her quest to discover who originally wrote Shakespeare's plays. Desdemona agrees and tells her to come to battle. Constance wonders if she has permanently changed Shakespeare's work and resolves to find the □Wise Fool,□ a typical Shakespearean character, who secures the happy ending of a comedy.

In scene 2, Iago discloses that he has a page from the Gustav manuscript and forms a plan to conspire against Constance. Constance bonds with Desdemona, telling of her relationship with Professor Night, while Iago eavesdrops. Constance describes the world of academia and her newfound feminist convictions. Desdemona encounters Iago carrying buckets of filth, and Iago stirs jealousy in her. Desdemona believes Iago's claims that Constance is a witch who is after Othello's heart, and she resolves to kill her.

Desdemona sees Othello give Constance a necklace, and her suspicions increase. Constance muses about what a strong woman Desdemona is. Iago and Desdemona enter, fighting with swords, and Constance nearly kills Iago, thinking that she is saving Desdemona. Iago shows Desdemona the page from the Gustav manuscript, saying that he found it in Desdemona's underwear drawer. Desdemona shows it to Constance, who confirms that it is hers. She reads its clue that she must seek truth in Verona, Italy. Before Desdemona can kill her, Constance is dragged offstage.

Act 3

Act 3 takes place within the context of *Romeo and Juliet*. It begins with the scene in which Mercutio fights with Tybalt. Constance arrives and tackles Romeo to the ground before Tybalt can stab Mercutio under Romeo's arm. Romeo tells her, □Speak, boy,□ confusing her gender because Desdemona has ripped off Constance's skirt. Calling herself Constantine, Constance explains that they should stop fighting, because Romeo has married Juliet and they are all family now. They agree, and Romeo falls in love with Constance. The men make lewd jokes and go to the bathhouses. Constance wishes that she could go back home.

In scene 2, Juliet and Romeo wake up together and describe their declining interest in each other. They fight over their turtle, Hector, and end up ripping it in two; they part on bitter terms. Juliet complains to her nurse that she is dying of boredom and wishes that she could be unmarried, able to play the deadly game of love. The nurse tells her that she should cheer up, because she will enjoy the marriage festivities that night, and Juliet resolves to find another lover.

In scene 3, Constance pounces on a servant because she believes that he is the Wise Fool, but she finds instead that he is giving out invitations to a masked ball thrown by Juliet's father. In scene 4, Romeo and Juliet enter the masked ball, sulking at each other. Romeo thinks that Tybalt is Constance and puts his hand on Tybalt's bottom. Constance enters, and Romeo tells her that he loves her. Tybalt sees Romeo kiss Constance and sends Juliet to interrupt them. Romeo introduces Constance to Juliet, and Juliet falls in love with her.

Juliet dances with Constance while Romeo and Tybalt watch suspiciously. Tybalt resolves to kill Constance. Romeo decides to dress as a woman so that Constance will desire him, and he cuts in to dance with her. Juliet sees them and determines to dress as a man so that Constance will desire her. Romeo and Juliet begin to fight over Constance, and Constance tells them to apologize.

In scene 5, Juliet enters dressed in Romeo's clothing and woos Constance from below her balcony. They discover that they have the same birthday. Constance resists Juliet and tells her of her bitterness about love. Juliet tells her that she knows the name of the Wise Fool and will trade it for one kiss. Romeo then enters in Juliet's clothing, but Constance leaves before he can woo her.

Scene 6 takes place in the graveyard through which Constance walks on her way to Juliet's balcony. While she is there, she sees a ghost like that of the King in *Hamlet*, who tells her that the Wise Fool and the Author are the same □lass.□ The ghost disappears, and Tybalt enters, trying to kill Constance. Romeo steps between them, and Constance escapes.

In scene 7, Juliet pulls Constance up to her balcony with a rope. They share a long kiss, and then Juliet admits that she lied about knowing the name of the Wise Fool. Juliet tries to kill herself, but Constance pins her down and reveals that she is a woman. Juliet

exclaims that she loves her all the more. Constance claims that she is not a lesbian, but Juliet convinces her that they should make love. Constance reaches under Juliet's shirt, where she finds a page from the Gustav manuscript.

A warp effect brings Desdemona to the scene, and she begins to smother Constance with a pillow. Juliet tries to save her and then goes to seek help. Constance holds up the necklace that Othello gave her, which has a birthday inscription to Desdemona, and Desdemona stops smothering her. Tybalt arrives, and Constance pretends to be dead, telling Desdemona to seek Juliet. In scene 8, Desdemona confuses Romeo for Juliet and tells him to meet them in the crypt.

Romeo, who is still in Juliet's clothes, has fallen for Desdemona. In scene 9, he invites her to lie with him in the crypt. Romeo confuses Tybalt for Desdemona, however, and Tybalt carries Romeo away, thinking that he is a maiden. Juliet enters and starts to stab herself out of sorrow, but Constance stops her, and they embrace. Desdemona enters and starts to stab Juliet until Constance stops her. Desdemona then urges Constance to come to Cyprus, while Juliet exhorts her to remain and die with her. Constance interrupts them and points out their faults. They promise to forgo their tragic impulses, and Constance realizes that she is both the Author of the play and the Wise Fool. Constance is then transported by warp effect back to her office at Queen's University, where she finds that her pen has turned to gold.

Act 1, The Dumbshow

Act 1, The Dumbshow Summary

The Dumbshow consists of three simultaneous vignettes displayed without speech. In the first vignette Othello murders Desdemona in her bedchamber by smothering her with a pillow. In the second vignette Romeo lies dead in a crypt as Juliet awakens, mourns, and kills herself with a rapier. In the third vignette Constance Ledbelly sits in her office having a telephone conversation which upsets her; she subsequently hangs up the telephone, throws her pen and the leather-bound Gustav Manuscript into the trash and exits her office.

Act 1, The Dumbshow Analysis

The Dumbshow introduces five of the play's sixteen characters, including Constance Ledbelly, the protagonist and principle character of the drama. The simultaneous presentation of three vignettes welds them together in tone and theme; two famous Shakespearean scenes are portrayed alongside Constance's telephone call without dialogue. Although recently slain, Desdemona, Romeo, and Juliet will all appear in later scenes of the play.

Act 1, The Prologue

Act 1, The Prologue Summary

The chorus enters Constance's office by walking through the wall. The chorus lights a cigarette and delivers a monologue. The chorus states that a unified soul can be constructed from shards, just as gold can be derived from base metal through the utilization of the Philosopher's Stone. The chorus plucks the discarded Gustav Manuscript from the trash, sets it on the desk, and notes that the manuscript is Constance's Philosopher's Stone. The chorus stubs out the cigarette and exits.

Act 1, The Prologue Analysis

Act 1, The Prologue, introduces the Chorus. The chorus, who also appears briefly in Act 1, Scene 1; and Act 3, Epilogue, opens the dialogue of the play by inferring that Constance suffers from a divided mind which will shortly be made whole by the action of the Gustav Manuscript retrieved from the wastebasket. It will be remembered that Constance discarded the manuscript after a troubling telephone call in Act 1, The Dumbshow. As typical of Shakespearean-era drama, the chorus opens and concludes the action of the play.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Constance sits in her office and writes her dissertation; she reads aloud as she writes. Constance nibbles on Velveeta cheese and sips warm beer from a can as she develops the idea that Shakespeare's 'Othello' and 'Romeo' are not truly tragic figures, because their plights could so easily have been avoided. She ponders the notable lack of the character of a Fool in the plays 'Othello' and 'Romeo and Juliet', and speculates that were a Fool present the tragedies might have been banal comedies. She is interrupted by the Student, a young woman who delivers a late assignment and makes a few brief and casual comments.

Constance returns to her dissertation and wonders if Desdemona's murder at the hands of Othello was truly inevitable. Constance turns to a complete works of Shakespeare, flips through some pages, and begins to read. As she reads, Iago and Othello enter the stage and act out the so-called 'handkerchief' scene from Othello—Iago incites Othello to jealousy and convinces him of Desdemona's alleged infidelity. Othello makes an oath of vengeance. Constance is again interrupted by Ramona, a young woman who asks Constance to inform Professor Night that she has just been selected as a Rhodes Scholar. Ramona then criticizes Constance's choice of beers and leaves.

Constance returns to her dissertation and wonders if the death of Mercutio and others would have been prevented had Romeo only admitted his betrothal to Juliet in a timely fashion. Constance turns again to her complete works of Shakespeare, flips some pages, and begins to read. As she reads, Tybalt, Mercutio, and Romeo enter the stage and act out the duel scene—Tybalt and Mercutio argue and exchange insults while Romeo dazedly watches, then Tybalt stabs Mercutio under Romeo's arm and flees. Constance turns again to her dissertation and continues to speak aloud as she writes. She wonders if a so-called Wise Fool could have changed the course of either play. Constance refers the so-called Gustav Manuscript—in fact the manuscript she had earlier discarded. The manuscript consists of three pages of cipher which, for some reason, Constance believes to be the original source material for Shakespeare's 'Othello' and 'Romeo and Juliet'.

A highly distracted Constance is startled by the entrance of Professor Night. Constance and the Professor hold a lengthy dialogue during which it becomes obvious that Constance is quite taken with the Professor's bold attitude and good looks—she apparently can overlook his amoral behavior. The Professor tells Constance that the Gustav Manuscript is a red herring and a hoax—he cautions her that pursuing the topic will wreck her academic career. Constance delivers a paper for publication and a speech; the Professor thanks her for ghost-writing all of his academic materials and hints that he appreciates her silence about the situation. He explains he has been made a full professor and has accepted a job at Oxford—the very job that Constance had hoped to acquire. He produces a diamond wedding band and Constance mistakenly

believes he is proposing to her—in fact, he intends to propose to Ramona. The Professor then announces that Constance will be shortly offered an undesirable position which she must accept, and then leaves with a casual attitude.

Constance is devastated and decides her career is meaningless. She begins to pick up personal objects from her office and discard them into the trash. She picks up the Gustav Manuscript and begins to discard it once again but the cipher title catches her eye and—inexplicably—she can suddenly decipher it. As she reads the title in amazement, the manuscript exerts an apparently magical force upon Constance, and she is sucked away into the wastebasket in a mystical vortex. The Chorus once again enters Constance's office and wryly notes that with the subconscious mind, anything is possible.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Act 1, Scene 1 takes place entirely within Constance's office and introduces three new characters of the Student, Ramona and Professor Claude Night. These three characters are all relatively minor characters and do not appear again within the drama—though Professor Night is referred to again. Professor Night does exchange a significant amount of dialogue with Constance, however, which fully develops the plot devices used throughout the remaining two acts of the play.

Constance is obviously smitten with Professor Night and has written academic papers which he has published under his own name, either crediting Constance with simple copy editing or merely dedicating the papers to her. In addition, she writes his public speeches. Constance's work has earned Professor Night a full professorship and a new job at Oxford. Professor Night, meanwhile, holds Ramona as his object of desire. She is younger than Constance and presumably less bookish and timid. Ramona is apparently aware of Professor Night's unwanted attention, because rather than deliver news to him directly she enlists Constance as an intermediary (this subtle element is typical of the discreet humor which fleshes out the remarkably developed script).

At the university Constance is referred to, behind her back, as 'the mouse' due to her timid and shy behavior. This nickname is humorously supported by Constance's predilection to nibble on Velveeta cheese. Professor Night condescendingly calls her "my little titmouse" (p. 22) which he apparently feels softens the blow by sexualizing the unwanted nickname. While the prefix 'little tit' is amusing within the context of the play, it also provides a great deal of negative characterization for the Professor. The fact that Constance accepts the insulting pet name without objection also characterizes her. Finally, as 'titmouse' is a commonly used word in Shakespeare, the triple entendre is particularly risible—it will again be referenced when Constance attends a costume ball in Act 3, Scene 4, disguised as a mouse. Of course one sees in Professor Claude Night's name a pun on the title of the play. Although the suave Professor's exploitation of the socially inept but yearning Constance is extreme, it is unfortunately only too realistic in its portrayal of academia; the young and insightful Ramona's disinterest in the Professor completes the comic love triangle. This state of unrequited love

foreshadows a similar love triangle which develops between Romeo, Juliet, and Constance in Act 3.

The lengthy monologues delivered by Constance as she develops the thesis of her dissertation form the foundational plot of the remainder of the drama. She notes that the so-called Wise Fool is commonly considered to be drama's authorial voice; this will certainly be true in the remainder of the action as Constance magically takes the role of the Wise Fool in an altered 'Othello' and 'Romeo and Juliet'. Constance's primary argument centers on the supposed inevitably fated tragic deaths in Romeo and Juliet and Othello. She convincingly argues that the many deaths—indeed the entire tragic cycles of both plays—could have been easily avoided by very simple truths.

Thus, Constance contends that the plays are ambivalent Aristotelean responses to circumstances. She believes the bizarre Gustav Manuscript holds the truth; Constance is sure that the ciphered text contains the original versions of both of the plays wherein they are presented as light comedy, complete with the character of the Wise Fool. Constance further believes, apparently without any actual evidence, that Shakespeare had adapted the prior plays by removing the character of the Wise Fool and thus altering them into tragedies, albeit somewhat flimsy tragedies by her judgment. Of course, Constance also holds the wild notion that the second letter of the eighteenth word of every second scene in 'Othello', when cross-referenced with corresponding letters in 'Romeo and Juliet', spells out Shakespeare's confession of plagiarism. Her published academic production, credited to Professor Night, is apparently convincingly authoritative to a wide sphere—but her pet notions about Shakespeare are conspiratorial and outrageous. She is thus presented simultaneously as wise and a fool.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Iago and Othello repeat the prior rendition of the 'handkerchief scene'—at a critical moment, however, Constance strangely steps out from behind a prop and pulls the critical handkerchief from the treacherous Iago's pocket. Othello quickly realizes he has been manipulated and duped and, in anger, binds Iago. He then loudly and extensively praises Constance's wisdom, apparently unconcerned that she is a complete stranger. Desdemona then enters and Othello explains to her the entire situation. Desdemona likewise greatly praises Constance's knowledge, wisdom, and godliness. Othello drags Iago away as Desdemona exclaims that the virginal vegetarian Constance is the archetype of an oracular woman.

Desdemona urges Constance to study violence and become a warrior. Constance confides that she is furtively called 'the mouse' at the university; Desdemona decries the appellation as entirely unfair and urges Constance to learn to kill. Constance demurs but is notably impressed by the legendary Desdemona. Meanwhile, off stage, the battle of Othello, Act 3, Scene 3, audibly develops. Desdemona runs off stage to the fray and calls for Constance, whom she refers to as 'Con', to follow. Constance remains for a moment and states that for unknown reasons she has begun to speak in perfect blank verse. She wonders if, perhaps, a student has spiked her beer with LSD.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Act 2, Scene 1, establishes the plot and conflict which will be resolved in Act 2, Scene 2. Using a delightful blend of original Shakespeare, slightly modified Shakespeare, and new material the scene begins by replaying the so-called 'handkerchief scene' from Shakespeare's Othello. Constance intervenes at a critical moment and exposes Iago's treachery. Othello strangely takes Constance at her word and henceforth spurns Iago. Desdemona, likewise, finds Constance brave, virginal, and to be trusted and praised. A rather risible exchange of misunderstanding between Desdemona and Constance then ensues as Constance wonders about her fate and Desdemona encourages her to become violent and martial. The character of Desdemona is presented as more active and more bloodthirsty than is typical, and she contrasts well with Constance's self-doubt and introspective consideration of her own feminism. As the scene concludes Desdemona rushes off to the sounds of distant battle, apparently eager for the sight of blood. Constance has thus apparently played the role of the Wise Fool, entering the supposed tragedy at a critical juncture and exposing Iago's transparent lies. It would thus appear that she has turned the tragedy of Othello into a comedy by inserting a fool—Constance's hypothesis regarding the Gustav Manuscript thus apparently becomes credible.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Iago has reaped Othello's anger and has been consigned to slop out the privy. He staggers onto the stage with buckets full of excrement and then stops to eavesdrop on Desdemona's private conversation with Constance. Constance contemplates her life at Queen's University in language the Desdemona often misunderstands. Constance bemoans being made a fool by Professor Night and Desdemona urges Constance to avenge herself with violence. Constance interjects the profane 'bullshit' into the conversation and Desdemona takes up the word. Then a soldier enters and summons Constance to a meeting with Othello regarding the security of the realm.

As Constance exits, Iago emerges from the shadows and engages Desdemona in conversation. Using nearly identical language as with Othello in Act 2, Scene 1, Iago incites Desdemona to jealousy and convinces her that Constance is a spy and Othello's lover. Desdemona recalls many of the strange words and phrases that Constance has used during their prior conversations and Iago interprets them all to be expressions of witchcraft and Satanism. Desdemona becomes angrily agitated and demands of Iago irrefutable evidence of treachery. Iago offers Desdemona a page of the Gustav Manuscript which, he claims, he has procured from Othello's bedchamber.

Othello and Constance then enter and walk by, discussing Constance's intimate knowledge of local individuals and their personal situations. Othello expresses gratitude to Constance and offers her a diamond necklace. He then tells her an anecdote of adventure and departs. An enraged Desdemona mistakes Othello's heartfelt thanks as an amorous display and mistakenly concludes that Iago's vituperative accusations are entirely correct. Iago cautions Desdemona that Constance, supposedly a powerful witch, is likely also a master at swords.

Desdemona then emerges and speaks to Constance, informing her in an oblique way that her suspicions have been aroused and seemingly confirmed. In an accidental misunderstanding, the distracted Constance seems to confirm Desdemona's veiled accusations. Desdemona exits in a rage. Constance delivers a monologue in which she bemoans her lot in life, openly admires Desdemona's fierceness and martial ability, and wishes ill upon Professor Night.

Desdemona and Iago enter the stage engaged in a mock swordfight. When Iago disarms Desdemona, Constance leaps to protect her supposed friend and in a surprising fit of rage disarms Iago and threatens to kill him. Desdemona concludes that Constance is, in fact, a very capable master of swordplay and intervenes to save Iago's life. She then takes the page of the Gustav Manuscript, impales it on her sword, and thrusts it toward Constance's face. She demands to know if Constance is false. Constance reads the manuscript which instructs her to leave Cyprus for Verona; she disappears in a vortex as Desdemona lunges with her sword to extract vengeance for

her perceived perfidy—too late, as Constance has vanished leaving Desdemona holding only an empty dress. Iago suggests that if the future offers the chance, Desdemona might be better served by smothering Constance with a pillow.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Othello and Iago do not appear again in the play; the soldier appears only briefly in Act 2, Scene 2 and plays only a minor role. Act 2, Scene 2, resolves the situation developed during the previous scene. Iago has failed in his attempt to have Othello exact revenge upon Desdemona—presumably, Othello and Desdemona should thereafter remain happily wed. Iago, however, does not give up so easily—if Desdemona is not to die, then some other evil must result. Iago uses the same logic and nearly verbatim language to incite Desdemona to rage and convince her that Constance has become Othello's secret lover. Instead of presenting her with a handkerchief, however, he presents her with a page of the Gustav Manuscript which, he claims, he has taken from Othello's bedchamber.

Meanwhile, Othello rewards Constance's faithful service by offering her a diamond necklace and publicly praising her. He relates to her a silly anecdote about fording a river with his ox; Constance confuses the ox's ford with Oxford even as the diamond necklace symbolically represents Professor Night's diamond ring. The tiny moment of dyja vu meta-fictionally links Act 1 to Act 2 and is a particularly enjoyable aspect of the scene. Another meta-fictional element enters when Iago presents Desdemona with a page of the Gustav Manuscript as supposed proof of Constance's betrayal. Constance then ponders her own situation and delivers a lengthy and interesting monologue wherein she admires Desdemona and notes that Shakespeare did not present her as such a dynamic, warlike woman.

The scene concludes with Desdemona directly confronting Constance and bluntly accusing her of various perfidies. The absent-minded Constance misunderstands Desdemona's accusations and instead focuses on the Gustav Manuscript, once again realizing that she can read some of the cipher text. She reads the manuscript which informs her to leave Cyprus for Verona, and she vanishes in a flash as Desdemona lunges with her sword, retaining Constance's feminine dress but missing the mark. Iago humorously suggests that if the future should offer a second chance, Desdemona might do better by using a pillow to suffocate Constance.

Constance's role as the Wise Fool of Othello thus concludes. Although Othello has not yet murdered Desdemona it is clear that dramatic tragedy was not simply avoided by a timely disclosure of the Wise Fool. Constance's hypothesis regarding the Gustav Manuscript thus becomes less credible; apparently Shakespeare's drama has a resolute tendency to tragedy which is not so easily perturbed.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Romeo, Tybalt, and Mercutio argue as initially displayed in Act 1, Scene 1—now, however, the setting is a public place in Verona, Italy, not Constance's office. Constance enters—having lost her dress to Desdemona she is clad only in long underwear. She sees the argument developing between Tybalt and Mercutio. Just before the fatal blow she rushes to intervene and halts the impending physical violence by the public announcement that Romeo is, in point of fact, already Tybalt's relative.

Romeo mistakes her for a boy, apparently because of her dress, and lauds her actions and embraces her for an overlong time—alas, he swoons at her touch and in an aside announces that here, and at long last, he has found true love. Tybalt and Mercutio then engage in witty raucous banter and suggest a quick trip to the public baths. Romeo invites Constance, his new true love, who declines on various grounds. The three men walk off and Constance delivers a monologue, stating her desire to return home and wondering what will occur in Verona. She wonders where the Fool is and is angry that she must step in and perform the Fool's apparently simplistic duties.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Constance is mystically transported from Cyprus to Verona, *sans* her outer clothing. She arrives in Verona as Tybalt and Mercutio are engaging in an escalating argument; the scene is a repeat of a portion of Act 1, Scene 1, and Mercutio's death at Tybalt's hand is imminent. Constance interrupts the combat and preserves Mercutio's life by loudly announcing that Romeo has wed and is thus Tybalt's relative. Tybalt and Mercutio seem inordinately pleased to put aside their differences, and they begin to engage in crude jokes and innuendo. Perversely, Romeo mistakes Constance for a boy due to her dress; he simultaneously falls in love with the young 'man'. Constance, wishing to perpetuate the gender confusion, introduces herself as "Constan— ... tine" (p. 53); thus she evolves a routine element of comedy without giving it much thought. The three Shakespearean characters then determine to visit a public bath together and hint around at further hetero-sexual explorations. Constance, knowing that public nudity would reveal her sex, declines nervously on several humorous grounds.

As in Act 2, Scene 1, Constance's just-in-time appearance in the drama appears to have thwarted fated tragedy by resolving a tense situation by disclosing vital information—the province of the Wise Fool. The entire tone of the scene changes from violent tragedy to comic playfulness. This lends credence to Constance's hypothesis regarding the Gustav Manuscript. At the end of the scene Constance remains alone on stage bemoaning her interesting but unwanted travels, wishing to return home, and insulting the fool for not being present—she is apparently unaware that she is the fool, which is a delightful twist in the play-within-the-play.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

Romeo and Juliet awaken in their private room. Although they have spent the night together their erstwhile passion has obviously not only faded but fled entirely. Romeo informs Juliet that he plans to spend the day with his friends; Juliet appears to find this acceptable. In reality, Romeo plans to search for his new love—the boy Constantine. Romeo dresses and begins to leave but then calls out to Juliet, asking her where his pet turtle might be. They locate the turtle and Romeo determines to take the pet with him—Juliet insists the turtle must remain. A brief tug-of-war ensues and the poor turtle is ripped in two. Romeo leaves weeping for his lost pet and Juliet remains behind, also weeping.

Juliet's Nurse enters bearing yet another wedding gift. She mentions that the next day will be Juliet's fourteenth birthday and Juliet bursts into tears. The Nurse wonders if Romeo's well-endowed form or over-zealous lovemaking has made Juliet so distraught. Juliet says the Nurse is wrong—she is saddened by the tedium of being wed; she longs for her virginal days of being caught between desire and fulfillment. The Nurse cheers Juliet by reminding her of her wedding party to be held that very night; she suggests that Juliet inflame her passions on the many young men that will surely be present but then return to Romeo for ultimate satisfaction.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Romeo and Juliet act like an old married couple bored of each other's company. Romeo secretly thinks with lust on the new-met 'boy' Constantine while Juliet pines for the fiery touch of passion. In a scene reminiscent of a modern divorce-comedy, Romeo returns to fetch his pet turtle, an unmistakable reference to Shakespeare's 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', a poem of subsided love (the allusion to the poem is again reiterated in Act 3, Scene 7, when Desdemona "*rises: a Phoenix*" (p. 79). Hector, the poor pet turtle, is ripped in twain as Romeo and Juliet struggle for supremacy; they weep over his death and then depart. Juliet throws herself on the comforts of her Nurse who cheers her up by instructing her on how to inflame her passion. She also reminds Juliet of the evening's upcoming festivities. The dialogue in Act 3, Scene 2, is particularly well written and includes some of the most vivid imagery and comic exchanges of the entire drama. The sexually-minded Nurse does not appear again in the drama; however, her blank-verse wondering aloud to Juliet about Romeo's penis being, perhaps, over-large or his libido being, perhaps, insatiable is particularly risible.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

Constance lurks in the public squares of Verona searching for the fool who, she believes, is avoiding his occupation. She spies a Servant walking around with a basket full of scrolls which outwardly resemble the sheaves of the Gustav Manuscript. She pounces on the Servant and pins him down, demanding to know the author of the scrolls. The Servant announces that Juliet's father has written the scrolls—they are invitations to the evening party. Constance realizes her mistake but becomes determined to attend the party and goes off to buy a mask.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

This brief scene sets up plot elements which will reach a conclusion in later scenes. Constance becomes aware of Romeo's and Juliet's wedding dinner. As might be expected in a comedy, the festivities are to be held as a masked ball. Constance borrows some money from the servant she has accosted in order to purchase a mask. As is becoming increasingly obvious, Constance is unwittingly playing the part of the Fool rather well.

Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Romeo and Juliet attend their wedding costume ball—they are not in good spirits and do not enjoy each other's company. Romeo prowls about looking for Constantine while Juliet sneaks off and has sex with a partygoer. Constance finally arrives, unsuccessfully disguised by a mouse mask, and Romeo immediately embraces 'him', proclaims his love, and begins to kiss Constance's neck. Tybalt stands behind and watches the scene in disgust. Constance finally fends off Romeo's all-too-public advances as Juliet arrives.

Constance is awestruck by the youthful Juliet and after a brief introduction the two characters dance. Juliet, also assuming Constance to be a man, makes various lewd and blatantly suggestive remarks which Constance deflects as best she can. Romeo watches the sexually suggestive dancing of Constance and Juliet and then cuts in, announcing to Constance that his own gender betrays him—if Constance desires a woman, then Romeo will cross-dress, act feminine, and submit to sexual deviancy. Meanwhile Juliet fumes and decides that she must cross-dress and act masculine to entice Constance.

Tybalt has watched the entire proceeding and has become disgusted and publicly humiliated by Romeo's and Juliet's public displays of poor taste on their own wedding night. He crushes the beer can he has emptied and flings it at Constance's feet before storming out of the ball, vowing vengeance. The disturbance causes Romeo and Juliet to begin a spiteful argument, and they both berate the other's physique and sexual prowess. Constance intervenes and cajoles them into desisting, and then leaves.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

The scene presents the central conflict of the third act. Romeo and Juliet, sickened by each other, both desire Constance. They are convinced that she is a young Greek man. Romeo believes Constance must prefer women and therefore determines to play at being a woman. Juliet believes Constance must prefer men and therefore determines to play at being a man. The language and dialogue is fairly explicit though not to the extent as that of Act 3, Scene 5. The tragic love triangle is thus established, and the violent and lurking Tybalt has been angered and provoked.

The beer can that Tybalt crushes and discards is, in fact, the self-same beer can from which Constance sipped warm beer in Act 1, Scene 1—a fact that Constance realizes without being disturbed; she picks up the can and examines it minutely before again discarding it. Like the Chorus' cigarette butt and the Gustav Manuscript, the beer can is a physical object which has somehow transcended the 'real' world of Constance's university office and the 'fictional' worlds contained within Constance's wastebasket.

Act 3, Scene 5

Act 3, Scene 5 Summary

Constance enters her personal balcony and sees a cigarette butt on the floor. She picks it up, lights it, and smokes. Below, Juliet steals into the garden dressed in Romeo's clothing. Juliet declares her undying love for Constance; she explains that she knows of Constance's deviancy—that is, 'his' homosexuality—and theorizes that it arises only from inexperience with women. Juliet bluntly offers the joys of sexual intercourse and promises hours of sexual pleasure. When Constance roughly declines Juliet immediately offers to engage in sodomy. A shocked Constance protests Juliet's supposed innocence which Juliet brushes aside as so much nonsense.

Juliet then persistently demands to know of Constance's prior lovers. Constance slowly admits that, in fact, she loved Professor Night and that he took enormous advantage of her. Juliet concludes that, after all, Constance is homosexual but might be enticed into heterosexual intercourse by Juliet's youthful body. Constance claims to only want to know the secret of the author; Juliet claims to know the secret and offers to exchange the information for a kiss. Constance agrees and a meeting place is agreed upon. Juliet exits the garden just before Romeo sneaks in, dressed in Juliet's clothing—alas for Romeo, he is too late for Constance has also already departed her balcony.

Act 3, Scene 5 Analysis

The scene presents an enjoyable role-reversal as Juliet 'o'erperches' Constance's garden wall and accosts her upon her balcony. She repeats verbatim to Constance many of the very words with which Romeo successfully wooed her just days before while she stood on her own balcony. Juliet surmises aloud that Constance—as Constantine—is a homosexual Greek lad who is a virgin from woman's sex. Juliet proposes that she introduce Constance to heterosexual intercourse, a pleasure which she is sure will entice Constance to become her routine lover. A flustered Constance protests that she is not interested—that is, does not desire Juliet sexually. Juliet, as usual, misunderstands the objection and immediately offers to engage in sodomy to satisfy Constance's supposedly deviant desires. A shocked Constance is diverted into a discussion of her unrequited love for Professor Night. Constance admits to loving him and being used by him; Juliet continues to assume Constance is describing a homosexual relationship.

Constance finally exclaims that all she wants to discover is the author of the Gustav Manuscript. Juliet immediately grabs her chance and claims that a Fool has told her the author's name; she will exchange the information for a kiss. Constance agrees and the two characters depart just as Romeo—dressed in drag—'o'erperches' Constance's garden wall and softly declares "Constantine ... it is I, Romiet ..." (p. 72). One only imagines that he plans to repeat verbatim his recently-successful effusions of love. The

language and blank-verse dialogue is explicit; the gender confusion and misunderstood sexual preferences of Constance are incredibly humorous but simultaneously explicit and thus perhaps inappropriate for all ages of audience.

Act 3, Scene 6

Act 3, Scene 6 Summary

Constance travels through a boneyard which separates her balcony from Juliet's balcony. She sings to herself that there are no such things as ghosts, when a ghost arises and begins to speak. They ghost speaks rather plainly, informing Constance that she is the fool and the author. Constance misunderstands and believes the ghost is speaking in riddles—she demands answers from the ghost but when the ghost provides the answers she again does not understand. She feels the ghost might be Yorick but the ghost denies the name. The ghost then sinks back into the grave.

Tybalt then enters the boneyard and accosts Constance, calls her a hermaphrodite and a villain, and demands satisfaction through a test of blades. He supplies Constance with a sword and then prepares to attack when suddenly a cross-dressed Romeo runs between them, begging them to allay their angers. As Romeo tries to part them Tybalt thrusts his sword at Constance under Romeo's arm—but it becomes entangled in the folds of Romeo's voluminous woman's clothing. Constance and Romeo then run off, followed by Tybalt.

Act 3, Scene 6 Analysis

As one might expect in a Shakespearean tragedy, a ghost arises mid-climax and confronts the protagonist, supplying vital knowledge. As one might expect in a Shakespearean tragedy, the exchange between ghost and protagonist is rendered meaningless by a massive play on words and confused misunderstandings. For example, when asked who wrote the play, the ghost replies "A lass!" which Constance mistakes for "alas". As the ghost sinks back to its restless grave Tybalt makes his plans for revenge clear—he provides Constance with a sword and demands satisfaction. Fortunately for Constance, the cross-dressing Romeo remains in hot pursuit and interrupts the pending duel in a satirized version of the Mercutio-Tybalt duel scene enacted in Act 1, Scene 1 and partially re-enacted in Act 3, Scene 1; only this time, Romeo's woman's clothing comes to the rescue by preventing Tybalt's furtive thrust from landing.

A particularly humorous element of the scene focuses on the apparel of the ghost. It wears upon its skeletal visage a hat originally worn by Constance in Act 1, Scene 1. The ghost refers to the hat as a 'fool's cap' which Constance appears to hear as a reference to 'foolscap', the type of writing paper which bears the Gustav Manuscript. Of course the ghost is trying to tell Constance that she is the fool who wears the fool's cap.

Act 3, Scene 7

Act 3, Scene 7 Summary

Constance flees the boneyard and arrives at Juliet's balcony. Juliet lowers a rope ladder and Constance scales the balcony and demands to know the name of the author. Juliet first demands her kiss. Constance attempts a demur peck but Juliet embraces her with passion until Constance struggles free. Juliet then admits she has lied—she does not know the author's name. In shame, Juliet attempts several times to commit suicide which Constance prevents. Constance then reveals her true gender to Juliet. Undismayed, Juliet immediately launches into a verbal exploration of the raptures of lesbianism. As Constance's hand wanders into Juliet's shirt she finds a page of the Gustav Manuscript inside. She draws it forth and another mystical vortex of energy swirls about. Juliet and Constance huddle together in fear as Desdemona emerges from the vortex.

Desdemona immediately accuses Constance of infidelity with Othello and quickly moves to smother her with a pillow. Juliet tries to intervene, offering herself in Constance's place, but Desdemona easily knocks her aside and continues smothering Constance as Juliet flees the room. Desdemona occasionally lifts the smothering pillow to speak to Constance, but then continues with the apparent murder. At the last moment Desdemona remembers that it is her birthday, and decides to spare Constance. Meanwhile, Tybalt begins to shout for vengeance from without.

Constance urges Desdemona to tell Tybalt that she, Constance, has been killed. She then asks Desdemona to arrange with Juliet for the three women to meet later in the crypt. After a brief moment of confusion—Desdemona had mistaken Juliet for a spindly boy—she agrees and complies. Tybalt enters and sees the presumably dead Constance. He exults and carries her away to the crypt. From afar Juliet sees Tybalt carrying what she supposes to be Constance's corpse, and she raises her dagger and vows to die alongside the body of Constance.

Act 3, Scene 7 Analysis

Throughout the scene Juliet attempts several times to die—she tries to have Constance kill her in anger; she tries twice to commit suicide but is prevented; she tries to have Desdemona smother her in Constance's place; she carries a vial of poison on her person; and finally she vows to commit suicide upon Constance's entombed corpse. Over the course of the past few scenes she has gone from a sex-crazed young woman engaging in sexual intercourse with a relative stranger to a young woman who vows to pretend to be a man and engage in mock homosexual sex to a young woman eagerly anticipating the joys of lesbianism. Meanwhile Romeo runs about in women's clothes, determined to pretend to be a woman and engage in mock heterosexual intercourse because his blunt offer of homosexual union was declined. Of course the furious and

lethal Tybalt stalks through the background of every scene, awaiting his chance of vengeance. This of course all makes for highly comic material but also indicates that a tragic conclusion of Romeo and Juliet is nearly unavoidable.

Desdemona's appearance completes the trinity of female leads; Constance, Juliet, and Desdemona all share the stage for a brief moment. The over-wrought Juliet and the martial Desdemona make a particular contrast which is rounded by the retiring academic Constance. The script notes that the three female characters all share the same birthday though they vary in age.

Act 3, Scene 8

Act 3, Scene 8 Summary

Desdemona spots Romeo attempting to scale Constance's balcony; she mistakes him for Juliet and addresses him. Romeo falls immediately in love with Desdemona and informs her that he is in fact a man though dressed as Juliet—she replies he had best not journey to Cyprus where transvestites are not welcomed.

Act 3, Scene 8 Analysis

This brief scene—the shortest in the play, quoted below in its entirety—arranges the plot to allow all of the major players in Act 3 to converge in Act 3, Scene 9. It continues to echo the by-now familiar humor of a cross-dressing Romeo being mistaken for the prepubescent Juliet.

Act 3, Scene 9

Act 3, Scene 9 Summary

Tybalt takes Constance to the crypt and places her on a slab. He furtively looks around and then announces his intention to examine the supposed corpse's supposed penis. He begins but is interrupted by Romeo's sad wailing. Tybalt looks around and finds Romeo prostrate and despondent on another crypt slab—mistaking him for a defenseless young girl, Tybalt grabs Romeo and carries him off to an uncertain fate.

Meanwhile Desdemona and Juliet arrive and congregate around Constance. Juliet expresses her undying love, Desdemona wonders if all Verona is homosexual, and Constance wonders what it all means. Desdemona insists that Constance return to Cyprus and pursue a violent revenge upon Iago while Juliet insists that Constance join her in unrequited love and suicide. Constance finally explodes in anger, denouncing both women as unreasonable and dimensionless; she bemoans her fate and exclaims that she was wrong in believing a fool could convert the tragedies of Shakespeare into comedies. Desdemona and Juliet interrupt her to confirm her suppositions—they agree they are not well-rounded characters but point out that this fact is what makes the tragic elements in their respective plays simultaneously comic. The ghost then speaks from below and again informs Constance that she is the fool and author—this time she finally understands.

Desdemona and Juliet wish Constance a happy birthday, and then an energy vortex whisks away the crypt scenery and replaces it with Constance's office, unchanged from the initial scene except that Constance slouches over the wastebasket, her head within. She stands up and finds everything exactly the same—except for her pen which has been transformed to solid gold.

Act 3, Scene 9 Analysis

The scene resolves the central themes of the play—Constance returns to her office having enjoyed her prolonged flight of fancy. She has realized that the tragedies of Shakespeare are simultaneously simpler than she thought yet far more resilient than she had credited. Desdemona is too like Othello while Juliet is too eager to die young—a Wise Fool could not prevent the tragedy but again a Wise Fool would appreciate the comedy in them. The Ghost confirms Constance as not only the fool of the play but also the author of the action.

The full comedy of the action concludes with Tybalt picking up Romeo bodily and carrying him off to an uncertain sexual adventure—Romeo appears eager though Tybalt's eventual reaction is humorous to contemplate. The action thereafter turns to more serious discussion, tinged with ridiculous urges to predetermined action, which examines the nature of the drama. Desdemona remains focused on violent revenge;

Juliet remains focused on youthful death—even as both women concur with Constance that their characters are fundamentally flawed. Constance concludes that she must have indeed been a fool to think that she could save the characters from themselves; the Ghost chimes in to confirm her suspicions.

The energy vortex once more arises and transports away the crypt and the characters. In a swirl of partial costumes and stage changes Constance reverts to her place in her office as though it were all a dream; she emerges again on stage with her head stuffed in the wastebasket—a funny but fitting metaphor for her one-sided relationship with Professor Night and her confused theory about the now-discredited Gustav Manuscript. Alas, poor Constance, wise—but a fool.

Act 3, The Epilogue

Act 3, The Epilogue Summary

The Chorus ends the play with a brief monologue delivered in Constance's office. He explains that the ancient hieroglyphs of the Gustav Manuscript have entered into Constance's unconscious mind and created a dreamy thought of drama around the pre-existing knowledge garnered through her long studies of literature. Constance's subconscious mind has thus spun gray matter into gold.

Act 3, The Epilogue Analysis

The Chorus fittingly concludes the play with a statement of authorial fact—Constance is the author of the action through her subconscious imaginings. The Gustav manuscript remains, as mysterious as before, but Constance emerges wiser and with a forward-looking attitude.

Characters

Author

See Constance Ledbelly

Chorus

The Chorus is the mysterious and riddling narrator of the play as well as the Ghost of act 3, scene 6. The choral tradition dates back to ancient Greece, where a group of people narrated and commented on the actions of a play. During Shakespeare's time, the chorus was often a single man who spoke during the prologue and epilogue. In the prologue of *Goodnight Desdemona*, the Chorus takes Constance's manuscript out of the wastebasket and talks mysteriously about alchemy, the mythical process of turning base metals into gold.

During the epilogue, the Chorus reveals that he played the part of the Ghost that appears to Constance in the graveyard. The Ghost tells Constance a number of jokes and riddles that hint at the solution to the play's mystery about the Wise Fool and the Author. Constance believes that the Ghost is Yorick, the family jester whom Hamlet finds dead upon his return to Denmark. As the Ghost, the Chorus serves to move along the plot and direct Constance to her discovery of herself.

Desdemona

Desdemona is Othello's wife and victim in Shakespeare's tragedy. She is generally considered a passive character who is devoted to her husband. *Goodnight Desdemona* challenges this view, however, and interprets Desdemona as a capable, headstrong, and even violent character who marries Othello because of her passion for war and conquest. In act 2, scene 2, Desdemona acknowledges that academia is wrong about her, when she shouts that the idea that she is a helpless victim is □*[b sh t]!!*□

Constance deeply admires Desdemona, claiming that she is □magnificent□ and □capable of greatness.□ In fact, Desdemona serves as an inspiration for Constance to develop her own confidence and strength as well as her beliefs about feminism. The only major fault in Desdemona's character is her impulse toward tragedy. Like Othello, Desdemona is susceptible to manipulation, because she is gullible and has a tendency to become very angry and jealous. At the end of the play, however, Desdemona promises Constance that she will reform this impulse and acknowledge life's complexity.

Ghost

See Chorus

Iago

Iago is one of English literature's most famous villains. He is a bitter and crafty liar who manipulates Othello into killing his wife. In *Goodnight Desdemona*, Constance foils Iago's plans, although Iago later conspires to manipulate Desdemona into turning against Constance.

Juliet

Thirteen-year-old Juliet is known throughout the world as a symbol of young love. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, she falls in love with the son of a rival family and then stabs herself when she finds him dead. Her lines beginning □O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?□ are among the most famous in English literature. Constance describes her as □the essence of first love□ / of beauty that will never fade, / of passion that will never die.□

In *Goodnight Desdemona*, Juliet is obsessed with passionate love. Her petty bickering with Romeo and the threats to tell their parents reveal that they are both immature adolescents who are inconstant in their desires. Juliet is strong and active about realizing what she wants, however. This is why she is willing to dress up as a man and vigorously woo Constance. Her views about love at first sight are idealistic and inspiring enough to persuade Constance to love her.

Juliet is also obsessed with death, and her overdramatic desire to die is a consistent joke in the play. However much she is charmed by Juliet, Constance faults her tragic impulse toward death and destruction. At the end of the play, Juliet swears that she will reform this impulse and take Constance's advice.

Constance Ledbelly

The protagonist of the play, Constance is an assistant professor at Queen's University who finds her true identity by traveling through the worlds of Shakespeare's works. She is a somewhat clumsy and absent-minded person, but she has a great talent for teaching and literary analysis. At the beginning of the play, she is a frustrated doctoral candidate in love with Professor Night. By the end, she has discovered her sexual desire for women, uncovered her true potential as a scholar, and gained a broad and substantial confidence in herself.

At the center of Constance's struggle is her lack of confidence. Rejected and manipulated by Professor Night, she believes at the outset of the play that she is a failed scholar and lover. Like Desdemona and Juliet, she has an impulse toward self-destruction and tragedy. The fact that she is a woman is crucial to this lack of confidence; Constance tells Desdemona that she is not □some kind of feminist. / I shave my legs and I get nervous in a crowd.□

It is by coming to terms with her femininity that Constance begins to uncover some of her best qualities and have faith in her mind and personality. She is inspired by the strength of Juliet and Desdemona, characters that have been misinterpreted by the male-dominated academic world. Constance recognizes that women have been lied about and oppressed, and she gains confidence because these women are actually admirable and inspiring figures.

Constance's true identity, therefore, is a self-assured feminist. She remains somewhat clumsy and awkward, but this is part of her identity as the Wise Fool who is able to write and peacefully resolve comedic plays that Shakespeare turned into tragedies. She returns to the real world with a fuller knowledge of herself and an appreciation of the lessons she has learned from Juliet and Desdemona: namely, an understanding of her latent lesbian desires and a capability to practice violence.

Mercutio

Mercutio is Romeo's close friend and kinsman. In *Romeo and Juliet*, his death and dying words, □A plague a' both your houses!,□ set off the tragic events of the play. It is because Constance saves his life that *Goodnight Desdemona* can become a comedy.

Professor Claude Night

Charming and manipulative, Professor Night is the object of Constance's affections until she finally gets over him. He has an Oxford accent, is □*perfectly groomed*,□ and □*oozes confidence*.□ He exploits Constance by asking her to do a great deal of his work for him and receive no credit in return. His attitude toward her is sexist and dismissive, and he frustrates the audience because he gets away with everything. Instead of recommending Constance for a lecturing post at Oxford University, he takes it himself and begins a relationship with Ramona, a young student.

Nurse

As in Shakespeare's play, Juliet's nurse is a pragmatic woman who is devoted to Juliet and indulgent of her.

Othello

Othello is the tragic hero of his self-titled play, famous for his courage and strength as well as his rampant jealousy. He is a war hero of the Venetian empire, engaged in battle with the Turks on the island of Cyprus. Constance arrives during the scene in which Iago tells Othello that his lieutenant Cassio is in possession of Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello signals his readiness to be fooled with his famous lines □Had Desdemona *forty thousand lives*! / *One is too poor, too weak for my revenge*.□ Constance exposes Iago's lies, however, and Othello is extremely grateful.

Ramona

A young female student who is □*all business and very assertive*,□ Ramona competes with Constance for Professor Night's affections. She wins a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University and travels there with the professor, who has bought her a diamond ring.

Romeo

Romeo is the famously passionate lover of *Romeo and Juliet* who upsets his family by marrying the daughter of their rivals. In the original play, Romeo becomes embroiled in conflict after Tybalt kills Mercutio, and he eventually kills himself, believing that Juliet is dead. Constance avoids these tragic events by telling Tybalt and Mercutio of the marriage.

In *Goodnight Desdemona*, Romeo is a figure of comic relief because of his inconstant and often ridiculous passions. He falls in love with Constance, thinking that she is a boy named Constantine, and quickly becomes unhappy with his marriage to Juliet. Romeo dresses as a woman in order to win □Constantine,□ but he ends up falling for Desdemona and then being whisked away by Tybalt. Romeo's various homosexual and heterosexual desires suggest that he is an adolescent with shifting passions but no firm convictions.

Soldier of Cyprus

The soldier of Cyprus acts as Othello's messenger to Desdemona in act 2, scene 2.

Servant

Capulet's servant is handing out invitations to Romeo and Juliet's marriage feast when Constance pounces on him, mistaking him for the Wise Fool.

Student

The student whose name Constance confuses between □Julie□ and □Jill□ turns in a late paper in act 1, scene 1.

Tybalt

Tybalt is Juliet's headstrong and violent cousin. He kills Mercutio, and Romeo kills him in *Romeo and Juliet*, but Constance avoids these murders in *Goodnight Desdemona*. Throughout act 3, however, Tybalt remains a dangerous presence, ready to kill Constance and turn the play into a tragedy.

Tybalt is somewhat self-obsessed, and his sexually explicit banter suggests that he is possibly homoerotic or gay. MacDonald satirizes Tybalt's manly posing, and she emphasizes that this is one of the great dangers to the comic resolution of the play. In order to ridicule Tybalt's character, the playwright places him and Romeo in a variety of comical situations that culminate when Tybalt whisks Romeo from the crypt, believing that he is a maiden.

Wise Fool

See Constance Ledbelly

Objects/Places

Desdemona's Bedchamber

Desdemona's bedchamber appears in the opening scene of the play as one of three vignettes portrayed simultaneously in the Dumbshow. The furnishings and appearance are not specified; presumably they would match a minimal interpretation of the traditional bedchamber from Shakespeare's Othello. The bedchamber is the setting for Desdemona's murder at the hands of Othello and does not recur later.

Crypt

A crypt appears in the opening scene of the play as one of three vignettes portrayed simultaneously in the Dumbshow. The furnishings and appearance are not specified; presumably they would match a minimal interpretation of the traditional crypt from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The crypt is the setting for Juliet's discovery of Romeo's death and her subsequent suicide. The crypt is additionally the setting for the action in Act 3, Scene 9.

Constance Ledbelly's Office

Constance's office appears in the opening scene of the play as one of three vignettes portrayed simultaneously in the Dumbshow. The furnishings and appearance are not fully specified; presumably they would be typical of a cluttered and somewhat disorganized small office of a literature professor. Constance's office also provides the setting for the remainder of Act 1. The office, one of ten settings presented, is notable for being the setting of the longest sustained action of the play as well as being the only modern setting in the action; all other settings are derived from Shakespearean settings. The drama also concludes in Constance's office. Several office furnishings are noted in the script, including a wastebasket, a manuscript, a plumed pen, Constance's dissertation, a complete works of Shakespeare, and some clothing and food items.

Othello's Citadel of Cyprus

Othello's Citadel of Cyprus is the setting For Act 2, scenes 1 and 2. The furnishings and appearance are not specified though the action takes place in an interior room; presumably they would match a minimal interpretation of Othello's citadel from Shakespeare's Othello. The citadel is notable for being the sole setting of Act 2 of the play and thereby providing the backdrop for sustained action. The physical particulars of the citadel are not significant to the action of the play.

A Public Place in Verona

A "public place" in Verona is the setting for Act 3, scenes 1 and 3. Presumably the two public places are not the same public place. The appearance and character of the public place are not specified; presumably they would portray a historically authentic Verona. The physical particulars of the public places are not significant to the action of the play.

Romeo and Juliet's Bedchamber

In the play Romeo and Juliet share a joint bedchamber although its character indicates somewhat that it is more Juliet's than Romeo's; the bedchamber is the setting for Act 3, Scene 2. The furnishings and appearance of the bedchamber are specified only in vague terms; presumably it would be appointed as a typical Shakespearean bedchamber, probably matching a minimal interpretation of Juliet's from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The youthful Juliet wears a 'Renaissance peignoir' as Romeo dresses and exits the room, completely uninterested in his lusty young bride's sexuality.

Capulet Hall

Capulet Hall is the setting for Act 3, Scene 4. The furnishings and appearance are not fully specified; presumably they would match generally a minimal interpretation of the Capulet family's home from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The physical particulars of the hall are not significant to the action of the play beyond being an area divided into distinct locations suitable for various asides and discreet dialogue.

Constance's Balcony

Constance's Balcony is the setting for Act 3, scenes 5 and 8. The appearance of the balcony is not specified; presumably it would generally match the appearance of Juliet's Balcony, the setting for Act 3, Scene 7. It is positioned over a garden that is surrounded by a wall, and has a balustrade which Romeo attempts to scale.

The Boneyard and Crypt

The boneyard surrounds a crypt; the crypt is the setting for one of three vignettes presented in the opening scene of the play. The boneyard and crypt are subsequently the setting for Act 3, scenes 6 and 9 and also the epilogue. It is thus notable that the play's action opens and nearly concludes in the crypt. The appearance of the boneyard and crypt are not fully specified; presumably they would match a generally Shakespearean interpretation of a cemetery and burial crypt. Juliet notes that only scoundrels—actors, whores, and pedants—are buried and condemned in the unhallowed place. Later, of course, Juliet will unsuccessfully seek her own life within the

boneyard. The Ghost appears only in the boneyard and it can therefore be regarded as a setting of bleak but absolute truth.

Juliet's Balcony

The famous location of Juliet's Balcony is the setting for Act 3, Scene 7. The appearance of the balcony is not specified; presumably it would match a minimal interpretation of Juliet's balcony from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. As to be expected, it is positioned over a garden that is surrounded by a wall, and has a balustrade.

The Gustav Manuscript

The Gustav Manuscript is an ancient manuscript consisting of three pages covered in a bizarre cipher. The pages are bound in an ancient leather cover which has a cipher title. Constance Ledbelly is convinced that the Gustav Manuscript, once decoded, will prove to be an original-source text for Shakespeare's Othello and Romeo and Juliet; there appears to be little, if any, rationale for her opinion. Her more pragmatic but less likable boss is convinced that the Gustav Manuscript is a meaningless hoax which will wreck Constance's academic credibility. The manuscript apparently is magical in a type of way, however, as it transports Constance from her office into the world of Shakespeare's plays and thus serves as a principle *deus ex machina* for the play's plot development.

Themes

Feminism

One of MacDonald's most important thematic goals in *Goodnight Desdemona* is to develop and explore feminist ideas. The play consistently returns to themes of women's rights, women's issues, and gender identity. MacDonald establishes a number of historical and contemporary examples of the oppression, mistreatment, or misunderstanding of women, and she explores some possibilities of addressing these problems.

Constance's experience at Queen's University is MacDonald's first example of sexism in contemporary culture. Professor Night has exploited Constance's ideas and efforts for years, securing a position for himself at Oxford University based on her writings. At the same time that he takes advantage of her hard work, however, he insults her, telling her she has an □interesting little mind□ and calling her belittling names like □my little titmouse□ and □pet.□ These names reveal that the professor is sexist and bigoted as well as exploitative and that he takes advantage of Constance on the basis of her gender.

Constance's journey into the worlds of Shakespeare's plays reveals that sexism is ingrained in the common understanding of literature and history. Tybalt seems to distrust and dislike all women, and this attitude is shared to a certain degree by Iago and Romeo. MacDonald suggests that Desdemona and Juliet, both strong-minded figures, encounter sexism in their own time and are also misunderstood by contemporary professors and readers. *Goodnight Desdemona* stresses that it is important to reevaluate historical attitudes toward women and recognize admirable female figures in history and literature.

Goodnight Desdemona also pays close attention to the feminist themes of gender identity and gender role. Many of the play's characters experience a learning process about their gender roles. When Romeo and Juliet dress in drag and when Desdemona sword fights or participates in military violence, MacDonald is commenting on the flexibility of gender identities and the importance of testing and changing their boundaries. The most important character in this regard is Constance, who discovers that her latent attraction to other women, her ambitions as a scholar, and her ability to stand up for herself are all natural and acceptable aspects of her identity as a woman.

Academia

Related to the theme of feminism is MacDonald's critique of the contemporary academic culture in Canada and Great Britain. *Goodnight Desdemona* highlights a traditional, male-dominated university system, in which older male professors are able to take advantage of intelligent females. MacDonald suggests that 1980s Canada should

reform this unjust system. Ramona seems to be Professor Night's next victim in a system that is not likely to be getting any better, although it may be significant that both of them will be leaving Canada for England.

Shakespeare and Elizabethan Studies

Also important to MacDonald's thematic agenda is her treatment and analysis of Elizabethan culture and drama. *Goodnight Desdemona* reimagines some of Shakespeare's most famous characters, providing an interpretation of his texts and their historical context.

Some of MacDonald's commentary about Shakespeare's works and Elizabethan culture is deliberate satire. For example, she pokes fun at Othello's boastfulness, Tybalt's capacity for anger and violence, Romeo's inconstancy, and Juliet's death drive. All of these characteristics have strong bases in the original plays, but MacDonald exaggerates and draws attention to these faults. MacDonald also satirizes common characteristics of Elizabethan society, such as gender bending and lewd jokes.

Not all of MacDonald's commentary is satirical, however. *Goodnight Desdemona* reinvents Shakespearean characters, particularly Desdemona and Juliet, based on the ways that MacDonald feels they should be interpreted. This process emphasizes the characters' positive and admirable characteristics as well as their faults. The play implies that Desdemona's love of violence and Juliet's strong-minded passions are important elements of Shakespeare's work that are often misinterpreted by contemporary readers and scholars.

Tragedy and Absolutism

MacDonald stresses throughout the play that it is a great problem to see no gray area between comedy and tragedy. The Shakespearean characters are nearly all inclined to a tragic worldview, and they are in continual danger of following a dark destiny. Like Othello, Desdemona is jealous and gullible enough to commit murder. Meanwhile, characters like Juliet and Tybalt seem to have a death wish, often becoming overly dramatic and deliberately entering perilous situations. Constance herself is inclined to tragedy and despair until she learns the lessons of the play.

Based on her journey of self-discovery, Constance provides an antidote to the tragic impulse by stressing that it is necessary to abandon inflexible, absolute values; acknowledge the complexity of the world; and listen to the Wise Fool. Connecting tragedy to the belief in absolute values, MacDonald emphasizes that an absolutist mindset is dangerous and perilous, and it is preferable to avoid both tragedy and absolutism.

Shakespeare Is Resilient

The fundamental thesis of Constance's dissertation forms the basis of her extended fantastical experiences within two Shakespearean plays. Constance voyages to Othello and Romeo and Juliet convinced that the two plays are tragedies eked out of prior comedies; Constance maintains that the conventional role of the Wise Fool, notably missing from the two plays, would easily convert them from tragic to comic. The test of this thesis is put in action when Constance unknowingly and unwittingly assumes the role of the Wise Fool in both plays. She performs the small actions in each unfolding drama that she had previously described as the province of the Wise Fool.

To Constance's surprise, however, the two plays continue to unfold as tragedies. True, she manages to stop Othello from murdering Desdemona, and she manages to stop Tybalt from killing Mercutio, but other events continue to evolve in tragic ways. Soon, Desdemona is convinced that Othello is unfaithful with Constance and pursues violent revenge. Romeo develops homosexual tendencies, Juliet displays her deviant sexual desires and gasps with anticipation at the prospects of lesbian sex—both characters behave in ways that make social upheaval seemingly inevitable. Meanwhile, Tybalt stalks the background looking for a chance to exact a violent revenge upon Constance for her socially embarrassing influence over the mincing Romeo and the over-sexed Juliet. By the end of the action, Constance is ready to admit that Shakespeare is far more resilient than she had originally credited—his tragedies will be tragedies without or with the Wise Fool, because his characters cannot escape their own nature.

Tragedy Is Inescapable

Constance initially believes that Othello and Desdemona would live 'happily-ever-after' if only Iago's evil lies were exposed. She also initially believes that Romeo and Juliet would live forever as prepubescent lovers if only Tybalt would leave Mercutio unscathed—and surely, she reasons, Tybalt would not attack if he knew Romeo to be already wed to Juliet.

Alas, Constance learns that tragedy is not so easily avoided. True, her interference in the drama does expose Iago's villainous nature. However, the proud and haughty Othello is unable to publicly admit that he has been duped and thus retains Iago as a servant within the citadel rather than turning him out. Iago's base nature remains unchanged and he hunts about for his next victim. Desdemona is as gullible and violent as Othello and Iago soon has her whipped into a jealous frenzy against Constance and Othello. It thus appears that Othello is destined for tragedy regardless of a well-placed truth.

Constance similarly intervenes to save Mercutio's life; within moments Tybalt and Mercutio have calmed down and wander away exchanging bawdy jests with each other. Surely, now that Romeo and Juliet are publicly wed, their tragedy can be avoided and the drama will resolve into a banal story of young lust and sexual adventure. This is not to be; Romeo bores with Juliet after a single night of pleasure, and Juliet remains

unfulfilled after burning in Romeo's embrace. Both of the lustful children begin wandering again, searching out the next exciting sexual adventure—regardless of social catastrophe or even moral conventions. It thus appears that the Capulets and Montagues are destined for tragedy regardless of a well-intentioned disclosure.

Constance resolves the drama be admitting that her initial thesis is incorrect—Shakespeare's tragedies are not simply comedies excised of the Wise Fool; they are tragedies because tragedy is inescapable within their respective paradigms. This parallels her own real experience with Professor Night; he would not love her if only he knew her secret—clearly he knows her secret and, instead of honoring it uses it to his advantage. He would not love her if only a mutual friend intervened—he inexorably causes tragedy, albeit a minor tragedy, to descend upon Constance because his fundamental nature consists only of selfish conceit.

Desire... It's Terrible

Constance desires Professor Night but instead of reciprocating he exploits. Professor Night desires Ramona but she is uninterested. Iago convinces Othello that he has been betrayed by Desdemona; when Constance intervenes and exposes the truth Iago convinces Desdemona that she has been betrayed by Othello. Othello and Desdemona's relationship is entirely secondary to their desire for violent revenge against perceived wrongs. Romeo and Juliet have managed to consummate their desire only to find it unsatisfactory and ephemeral—yet neither character is satisfied. Romeo desires Constance who, though flattered, does not reciprocate. Juliet desires Constance who, though star struck, does not find Juliet sexually attractive. Then Romeo sees Desdemona and desires her; she considers him a deviant and wants nothing to do with him. Finally, Tybalt and a cross-dressed Romeo are paired together and exit stage *en route* to what promises to be a catastrophic sexual encounter. The sole apparently fulfilled desire in the action occurs off-stage when Juliet—apparently—has sexual intercourse with a relative stranger during her wedding celebration. Within seconds of regaining the stage the disheveled Juliet is already casting about her amorous eye; clearly the exchange was lacking.

Thus, all principle characters in the drama are full of desire but none of them receive fulfillment. Further, their unrequited desires form the basis of boorish but concentrated actions that lead inexorably to tragic consequences. In fact, the entire action of the drama is caused by unfulfilled desire, as well as the smaller actions within Acts 2 and 3; unfulfilled desire also forms the basis of the plots of the Shakespearean originals. The terrible inability to fulfill one's desires thus marks a principle theme in the drama and informs much of the comedy and tragedy presented. Who knows—perhaps Romeo ultimately finds satisfaction in the manly arms of Tybalt?

Style

Blank Verse

The most important stylistic aspect of *Goodnight Desdemona* is its attention to the customs and conventions of Elizabethan drama and culture. Particularly in acts 2 and 3, inside the worlds of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, MacDonald emulates and mimics Shakespeare's style. For example, MacDonald uses blank verse, the theatrical writing style made famous by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Blank verse is the name for unrhymed iambic pentameter, or lines that form a meter of five two-syllable units and do not rhyme at the end. Although blank verse is normally spoken without audible line breaks, it sets the work in poetry and adds what many consider a sense of gravity and beauty. MacDonald uses this style with great dexterity, capturing the poetic personality of Shakespeare's characters and setting Constance's lines into blank verse while retaining her personality and even the tone of her late-twentieth-century Canadian accent.

Asides and Monologues

Like Shakespeare, MacDonald makes use of monologues, in which a character expresses his or her state of mind directly to the audience. She also makes use of the □aside,□ the dramatic convention wherein a character speaks to the audience or to himself or herself but none of the other characters can hear what is said. As in Shakespeare, asides allow the audience to be in on a particular plot without all of the characters realizing it. When Iago hatches evil plots or Romeo and Juliet express their secret passions in asides, MacDonald is joking and playing with the convention both to amuse the audience and to develop the plot.

Word Order, Spying, Cross-dressing, and More

The play is full of jokes and references to Elizabethan culture and theater, and MacDonald is careful to get these details right. MacDonald uses the typical word order and archaic language, she makes use of onstage eavesdropping, and she employs the convention of cross-dressing that is common to Shakespearean comedy. All of these elements, as well as numerous other details, are effective in establishing the setting and atmosphere of the work as well as amusing and challenging the audience.

Point of View

The drama is presented from a traditional third-person, limited, point of view. No character has any special knowledge of situations which would not be expected given their background. For example, Constance knows a great deal about Othello's thoughts

and desires because she has read the Shakespearean play from when the character of Othello has been extracted. Beyond this knowledge, however, Constance is as oblivious to events as any other character. Traditional exceptions to this limited knowledge are present, however—both the Chorus and the Ghost intrude briefly from time to time to establish plot, resolve contention, or play the role of the Wise Fool. Their interaction with the drama is limited, however, and constitutes only an accepted and regular component of drama.

The point of view utilized is appropriate for the material and compelling. The action focuses on Constance and her development; therefore most, but not all, scenes center on her character and her actions and thoughts. When she wishes to divulge her inner desires or secrets, she does so in a traditional format—either as an aside or as a monologue. Other characters, to a lesser extent, utilize both these formats to expose their own inner thoughts.

Setting

The drama presents three principle settings, one for each primary Act of the play. Act 1 is set in Constance Ledbelly's Queen's University office. The furnishings and appearance of the office are not fully specified; presumably they would be typical of a cluttered and somewhat disorganized small office of a literature professor. The office is notable for being the setting of the longest sustained action of the play as well as being the only modern setting in the action; all other settings are derived from Shakespearean settings. The drama also concludes in Constance's office. Several office furnishings are noted in the script, including a wastebasket, a manuscript, a plumed pen, Constance's dissertation, a complete works of Shakespeare, and some clothing and food items.

Act 2 is set in Othello's citadel in Cyprus. The furnishings and appearance are not specified though the action takes place in various interior rooms; presumably they would match a minimal interpretation of Othello's citadel from Shakespeare's Othello. The citadel is notable for providing the backdrop for sustained action during Act 2. The physical particulars of the citadel are not significant to the action of the play beyond simply being noted as Othello's principle abode.

Act 3 is largely set in various locales within Verona, Italy, including Constance's balcony, Juliet's bedchamber and balcony, several public places, the Capulet family hall, and a crypt surrounded by a boneyard. The furnishings and appearances of these locations are not specified in the script; presumably they would match a typical interpretation of similar locations from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The settings in Act 3 are notable for providing far more variety than Acts 1 or 2, each of which is set in a single locale. Beyond being familiar locations the physical particulars of the settings within Verona are not significant to the action of the play.

Language and Meaning

The traditionally-formatted text is presented as a mixture of minor stage direction and extensive dialogue. Stage directions are indicated in italics and, when they occur within dialogue, are contained within square brackets. The bulk of the meaning of the drama is derived from dialogue. Note that the drama, originally published in Canada, uses non-USA spelling for several words.

Dialogue consists of a mixture of free speech and blank verse—that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter. Individual characters—notably Constance—speak in both methods and occasionally intermix the two within the same monologue. A notable amount of the dialogue is copies verbatim, or nearly verbatim, from Shakespeare; this purloined dialogue is noted by being set in italics.

The drama presents a remarkably accessible and enjoyable conglomeration of vintage Shakespearean verbiage, Shakespearesque speech, and modern dialogue, often mixed up within a single exchange. For example, Juliet may speak lines directly from Romeo and Juliet to which Constance responds with modern English. The text therefore presents a large amount of subtle multiplicity of meanings which are enjoyable to discover. The language of the drama is a hallmark of successful implementation.

Structure

The 87-page drama is divided into a pre-prologue, a prologue, three Acts, and an epilogue. The introductory pre-prologue is composed of three vignettes which are presented simultaneously; the remainder of the drama has a single focus of action. The prologue and epilogue are delivered by the Chorus, as is typical in dramas of this nature, as a type of introductory and concluding statement with authorial voice. The drama's principle timeline is quite straightforward and accessible.

Act 1 is composed of a single monolithic scene which is played out entirely within a single setting. It introduces many of the principle characters, establishes basic characterization of the principle protagonist, and discloses the fundamental plot and plot devices around which the drama is constructed.

Act 2 is composed of two scenes which are played out within the same setting. The first scene establishes the background of the action and presents the central conflict of the Act. The second scene evolves the conflict to climax and then resolves the dramatic tension of the Act. The balance of the Act is easily discerned and the action proceeds in a straightforward and unexceptional manner.

Act 3is composed of nine scenes, many of which take place in disparate settings within the city of Verona. The various scenes develop the background and central conflict of the Act as well as bringing the drama's overarching conflict to a climax. Thus, the entire play's climax lies alongside the Act's climax and both are resolved within the final scene

of the Act. The fragmented nature of the Act is obvious and aids materially in advancing the principle theses of the drama.

Historical Context

Late-Twentieth-Century Canada

Canada was a former British colony and a modern democracy in the late twentieth century. Most of Canada was English speaking, but French was also an official language, and the French-speaking province of Quebec had a unique culture in which separatism was a major issue. Canada's political and social climate was strongly affected by the United States, and the two countries had close economic ties.

Toronto Theater Scene

Toronto was the center of the English-speaking theater scene in 1980s Canada, a scene that had flourished since the 1970s. A number of playwrights revitalized Canadian theater in English, including David French, David Fennario, and Carol Bolt. The city became famous for direct, realistic, and compelling theater that often addressed important social issues, and playwrights like French were known for closely collaborating with directors and actors. Although MacDonald has since become a more international celebrity, she was closely identified with the Toronto theater scene when she produced *Goodnight Desdemona*.

Late-Twentieth-Century Feminism

Broadly speaking, feminism is the advocacy of women's rights, and it is a movement that dates back centuries. It advances the rights of women by acknowledging the historical dominance of men and working to address inequalities. The feminist movement began to exert an increasing amount of influence on literary and cultural studies in the decades following World War II. In literary studies, feminism has concentrated on critiquing the male-dominated literary canon, reevaluating the role of women in literature, studying writings about women, and exploring gender identity. Writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet began inquiries into feminist literary studies and critics like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Judith Butler have continued or adjusted their focus.

Elizabethan England and William Shakespeare

The rule of Queen Elizabeth I of England forms an important context for *Goodnight Desdemona*. Although *Othello* was probably first performed after the queen's death in 1603, it and *Romeo and Juliet* are associated with Elizabethan culture and society. Elizabeth was a shrewd, able monarch who presided over a period of increased power and prosperity in England. In this environment of relative tolerance and stability, the flourishing of the arts in continental Europe spread to England, and the late sixteenth

century became famous for a flowering in the arts known as the English Renaissance.

William Shakespeare is probably the most important dramatist in the English language, and his plays are considered the high point of Elizabethan art. Born in 1564, Shakespeare grew up in Stratford-upon-Avon during Elizabeth's rule. At some point before 1592, he moved to London and began a successful career as a dramatist, writing comedies, histories, and tragedies for the stage. *Romeo and Juliet* was probably first performed in 1594 or 1595 and *Othello* in 1604 or 1605.

The Venetian City-State

The pertinent scenes of *Othello* are set in sixteenth-century Cyprus, which was then a part of the Republic of Venice. A powerful mercantile city of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Venice ruled an independent empire that stretched between present-day Italy and Greece. The city of Venice established its independence in the ninth century and became very wealthy because of its extensive trade network. Venice was initially ruled by an all-powerful duke, but power was later divided between elected and appointed aristocrats. During the period in question, Venice was fighting the Ottoman Turks for control of Cyprus, which it would lose by 1571.

Fourteenth-Century Verona

Although Shakespeare does not set an exact date, *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in the city of Verona, Italy, at some point in the fourteenth century. This period was the height of Verona's power, when it was dominated by the aristocratic family of the Scaligeri. However, different aristocratic families competed for influence and control at this time, and, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, tensions ran high between bitter rivals.

Critical Overview

Goodnight Desdemona was a popular and critically acclaimed play that was vital to launching MacDonald's career. Critics writing for *Canadian Literature*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Maclean*, and *Back Stage* praised MacDonald for producing a witty and successful work. Mark Fortier, for example, writes in *Canadian Theatre Review* that the original production had its problems but that the play has great potential and that in one performance with □rare energy . . . I was given a wonderful sense of living, indigenous Shakespeare.□

Most critics tend to concentrate their discussion of the play on its value as a work of feminism. Although MacDonald has resisted classifying the play as an exclusively feminist work, she is a self-proclaimed feminist, and critics argue that her analysis of Shakespearean culture and the academic world rests heavily on the feminist tradition. Shannon Hengen, for example, stresses in *Canadian Literature* that the play is a □feminist comedy□ associated with □the potential for real social or political change.□ Similarly, Marta Dvorak writes in *Canadian Theatre Review* that the play □can be considered to exemplify contemporary 'female' artistic strategy□ and that MacDonald □playfully challenges preconceptions and breaks every rule□ with a □strategy of deviance□ in order to realize feminist goals.

Some critics are more ambivalent about the success of *Goodnight Desdemona* as a work of feminism. In *Commonweal*, for example, Gerald Weales writes: □A feminist play, then, but it is primarily a literary game in which MacDonald makes comedies□farces, more like□out of the tragedies. . . . But the device finally defeats itself, dissolving into historical tedium.□ Weales is in the minority, however, with most critics praising the success and innovation of MacDonald's feminism.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Trudell is a doctoral student of English literature at Rutgers University. In the following essay, he discusses MacDonald's feminist agenda, with a focus on how she uses the conventions of comedy, in the Elizabethan sense of the term, to forward this agenda.

MacDonald is a well-known feminist, and *Goodnight Desdemona* clearly brings forth a feminist agenda. In particular, it identifies the sexism and exclusion in both late-twentieth-century academic culture and historical (specifically Renaissance European) literary culture. The play then envisions an emergence of a degree of power and autonomy in its principal female characters, Desdemona, Juliet, and Constance. Desdemona represents violent female self-assertion, while Juliet represents passionate, boundary-crossing female sexuality. Constance absorbs both of these traits and emerges as a formidable literary scholar with faith in her own abilities and an independence from the male establishment.

Although MacDonald's feminist agenda is apparent and important, it is not generally considered confrontational or offensive to readers and theatergoers. Many critics have argued that the playwright goes to great efforts to disguise her political agenda as a vibrant and witty comedy. Because the play is funny, they say, audiences do not feel that they are being hit over the head with a political message. Mark Fortier, for example, comments on MacDonald's method of presenting a feminist message in his 1989 essay for *Canadian Theatre Review*:

MacDonald is uncomfortable thinking of *Goodnight Desdemona* as a feminist work; she prefers to think of it as humanism through a woman's point of view, or through feminist language. Although MacDonald considers herself a feminist, the strongest impulses in her theatre are popular and populist, and she seems to feel that labelling her work as feminist or lesbian would jeopardize the pluralist audience that she is seeking.

The reviewer Gerald Weales goes further and suggests in his 1992 review for *Commonweal* that the witty humor of the play □defeats itself□ and subverts its feminist message. Other critics, such as Marta Dvorak and Shannon Hengen, concentrate on the ways in which *Goodnight Desdemona* uses humor to produce an extremely effective and wide-reaching feminist political message. These critics disagree about the nature of the play's feminist argument and many aspects of how it is implemented. They tend to agree, however, that MacDonald packages her message in a humorous format so that it will be palatable and acceptable to an audience of wide-ranging political beliefs.

The danger of critical approaches that classify MacDonald's use of comedy as a humorous shroud over her political goals is that they tend to overlook a more important aspect of the play's use of comedy. These critics are inclined not to emphasize that the comic convention is important to the play's feminist subtext chiefly because it is the opposite of tragedy□in other words, because it requires a happy ending. The argument of this essay is that MacDonald may make use of humor and wit, but her main concern is to use the comic convention to underscore the nature of her positivist feminist

message. *Goodnight Desdemona* is the opposite of a tragedy in the sense that it encourages women to escape from the tragic fatalism of a patriarchal world and emerge as hopeful subjects.

To develop this argument, it is first necessary to clarify the terms *comedy* and *tragedy* as they were used in Shakespearean England. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and other writers contributed to the strict distinction between comedy and tragedy that was common to the Elizabethan period. While tragedies were characterized by disastrous yet necessary and unavoidable endings (according to ancient Greek and Roman models), comedies resolved in happy and hopeful conclusions. Both tragedy and comedy used humor, and a comedy could be entirely serious. *Goodnight Desdemona* is a comedy, then, primarily in the Elizabethan sense of the word: a drama with a happy ending.

Constance's chief function as the □Wise Fool□ and, more important, as the □Author□ and feminist literary scholar of the play is to formulate a comedy out of a tragedy. She goes about this quest by getting to know two of the most tragic and doomed female figures in English literary history. In a sense, her role is to redeem Desdemona and Juliet from four hundred years of resignation to their grim fates. She closely interacts with these characters, gaining their trust and undertaking along with them a journey toward empowerment and selfhood.

Constance's close interaction with the Shakespearean lines and characters suggests that careful readings and analyses of original texts are an important aspect of MacDonald's feminist agenda. She must throw herself down the □wastebasket□ of English literature□its □Garbage□ or □Sargasso Sea,□ a reference to Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which reimagines the life of Mrs. Rochester, a tragic character from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. Entering the Sargasso Sea is a metaphor for exploring the forgotten world of literature about women's issues that has been suppressed by centuries of male domination in the form of figures like Professor Night. Initially, Constance is in danger of losing herself in this Sargasso Sea, but instead she is able to find her own story and identity in a play that has been previously claimed by a patriarchal reading world.

Constance does not undergo a simple process of digging through a literary Sargasso Sea in order to find lost women's literature, however. Her journey of self-discovery is characterized by a reimagining and repossession of classic literature. As the □Author□ of the original comic precursors to Shakespeare's plays, she envisions herself in a position of control and power over literary history. There are hints in *Othello* that Desdemona is interested in war and violence, and Shakespeare indicates to some degree that Juliet is strong-minded, but Constance's reimagining of these characters goes far beyond interpretation or even parody. Desdemona and Juliet are rewritten according to MacDonald's 1980s feminist values. The play, therefore, proposes that contemporary scholarship should cross the line of what can be considered a reasonable interpretation of historical or canonical texts and begin understanding texts not as rigid formulas but as starting places for new ideas and possibilities.

The play implies, further, that the audience should partake in this process of historical repossession. Marta Dvorak points out, in her 1994 essay for *Canadian Theatre Review*, that Constance changes from the role of spectator to the role of □actor and author.□ Therefore, □Is this not an invitation to us spectators as well to assume our share of creativity, to use well our power of participation?□ The play implies that a spectator, normally someone who is forced to sit passively and absorb the message of a play, can and should actively participate and alter the implications of a particular work. This participation is a □power□ indeed, because it invites contemporary readers to reinvent history outside the accepted patriarchal discourse.

In the process, contemporary spectators are offered the possibility of working out their own problems. Constance is able to escape the sexism of the literary establishment represented by Professor Night, who is not only exploitative but also manipulative and repressive. When he tells Constance that she has □such an interesting little mind□ and then says, □Hand it over□ (seemingly referring to her latest plagiarism for him), he implies that he wishes to own and control Constance's mind. Because they are speaking about Constance's scholarly work, he also implies that his sexism extends to his interpretation of English literature and his wish to retain control over the patriarchal norms of literary interpretation. Furthermore, it is clear from the surrounding context that he wishes to control and confine Constance's sexuality to a tragic and hopeless longing for him.

Again, MacDonald casts the power struggle that follows Constance's rejection by Professor Night as a quest to rethink the tragic trajectories of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* and transform them into comedies. Constance's main reinterpretive role is to avoid the expected outcome of the tragedies, chiefly the tragic fate of Shakespeare's female characters, and empower these women with some important nuggets of late-twentieth-century wisdom. Constance invokes a critique of the absolutist, tragic mindset of historical literary women that leaves no room for an acknowledgment of complexity. She inspires a philosophical shift in Desdemona and Juliet, opening their minds to theories of relativism and feminism and unlocking them from what they previously considered unavoidable destinies.

MacDonald opens up the possibility, therefore, that contemporary readers and scholars can overturn historical forms of sexism and repression through a process of participation and reimagination. Her principal metaphor for this process relies on the conventions of Elizabethan comedy, which are less interested in humor than in the process of redemption and positive resolution. MacDonald does not provide the conventional marriage at the end of an Elizabethan comedy, but she does rely on the refusal of comedy to submit to fatalism and inescapable female tragedy. She reconstructs a feminist happy ending and urges contemporary spectators to do the same, reinventing and repossessing history.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Quotes

The following quotes retain, as much as possible, the formatting presented in the published script.

"*Act I, The Dumbshow.*

"*Three vignettes played simultaneously.* "*1 - Desdemona's bedchamber;* OTHELLO *murders* DESDEMONA *in her bed, by smothering her with a pillow.*

"*2 - A crypt;* ROMEO *dead,* JULIET *unconscious on a slab.* JULIET *awakens, sees* ROMEO*, and kills herself with his rapier.*

"*3 - Constance Ledbelly's office at Queen's University;* CONSTANCE *finishes a telephone conversation. She is upset. She hangs up the phone, takes her green plumed fountain pen from behind her ear, and pitches it into the wastebasket. She then picks up a long and narrow, ancient leather-bound manuscript, pitches it in after the pen, and exits.*" (Act 1, The Dumbshow, p. 13)

"Swift Mercury, that changing element,

"portrayed as Gemini, hermaphrodite and twin,

"now steers the stars of Constance Ledbelly,

"and offers her a double-edged re-birthday.

"[*he picks up the manuscript from the wastebasket and replaces it on the desk. An unintelligible inscription on the cover is now apparent*]

"Here is the key to her Philosopher's Stone—

"[*indicates manuscript*]

"the psychic altar that will alter fate.

"But she has not the eyes to see it ... yet.

"[*The* CHORUS *butts out his cigarette on the floor next to her desk and exits as:*]" (Act 1, The Prologue, p. 14)

"CONSTANCE: What if a Fool were to enter the worlds of both 'Othello' and 'Romeo and Juliet'? Would he be akin to the Wise Fool in 'King Lear'?: a Fool who can comfort and comment, but who cannot alter the fate of the tragic hero. Or would our Fool defuse the tragedies by assuming centre stage as comic hero? Indeed, in 'Othello' and 'Romeo and Juliet' the Fool is conspicuous by his very absence, for these two tragedies turn on flimsy mistakes—a lost hanky, a delayed wedding announcement—mistakes too easily

concocted and corrected by a Wise Fool. I will go further: are these mistakes, in fact, the footprints of a missing Fool?; a Wise Fool whom Shakespeare eliminated from two earlier comedies by an unknown author?! *Non obstante*; although a Fool might stem the blundering of Othello and Romeo, the question remains, would he prove a match... [*she pops the cigarette butt between her lips and hunts for a match*] for Desdemona and Juliet? Is there any Fool equal to the task of wrenching comedy forth their fatal hearts? Or are these excellent heroines fated to remain tragedies looking for a place to happen? [*having failed to find a match, she tosses the cigarette butt into the wastebasket, then opens the ancient Manuscript. It is the same length and width as foolscap. She becomes momentarily absorbed in it, trying to decipher it, turning every which way*] Nevertheless. I postulate that the Gustav Manuscript, when finally decoded, will prove the prior existence of two comedies by an unknown author; comedies that Shakespeare plundered and made over into ersatz tragedies! It is an irresistible—if wholly repugnant—thought." (Act 1, Scene 1, p. 21)

"It's all so strange ... What's even stranger though—

"[*she counts the beats of her speech by tapping each of the five fingers of one hand onto the palm of the other, in time with her words*]

"I speak in blank verse like the characters:

"unrhymed iambical pentameter.

"It seems to come quite nat'rally to me.

"I feel so eloquent and ... [*making up the missing beats*] eloquent.

"My god. Perhaps I'm on an acid trip.

"What if some heartless student spiked my beer?!

"[*stops counting*] Nonsense. This is my head, this is my pen, this is 'Othello,' Act III Scene iii.

"[*Sounds of the fray within*]

"DESDEMONA: [*within*] Constance, the fray!"

"CONSTANCE: Desdemon, I obey!

"[CONSTANCE *dashes off toward* DESDEMONA*'s voice*]" (Act 2, Scene 1, p. 38)

"TYBALT: Fortunate harbinger!

"MERCUTIO: Madcap youth!

"ROMEO: Brave Greek!

"[ROMEO *embraces* CONSTANCE*, but lingers a little too long with:*]

"[*aside*] *Did my heart love till now?* Forswear it, nay!

"*For I ne'er saw true beauty till this day!*

"MERCUTIO: Now we have put our angry weapons up,

"let's hie to Mistress Burnbottom's to put up

"and to sheath our jocund tools of sport.

"[*Lewd Renaissance gestures and laughter throughout the following dreadful jokes*]

"TYBALT: A bawd! And falling apart with'th' pox! Take care—

"*She'll* pay *thee*, and with a French crown too!

"MERCUTIO: Ay, a bald pate, for a little head!

"TYBALT: I'd as life to pluck a green maid off the street.

"MERCUTIO: Thou'dst feel that green fruit yerking in thy guts,

"when that her kinsfolk 'venge her maidenhead!

"TYBALT: She'd never know who'd had her maidenhead,

"for I would pass as quickly through the wench,

"as any fruit so green, would pass through me!

"[*Laughter*—CONSTANCE *nervously bites her thumb-nail*]

"*Do you bite your thumb at me sir?!*

"CONSTANCE: No! I just bite my nails, that's all.

"TYBALT: Do you bite your nails at me sir?!

"CONSTANCE: No I swear! Look, I'll never bite them again. This'll be a great chance for me to quit once and for all. Thanks.

"[*Pause. The boys tense. Will there be a fight?*]

"TYBALT: You're welcome." (Act 3, Scene 1, pp. 53-54)

"CONSTANCE: [*reading aloud*] 'Signor Capulet is pleased to announce the marriage of his daughter, Juliet, to Romeo of Montague, and doth request the honour of your company at a masked ball this night.' You're not the Fool.

"SERVANT: Thank you, sir.

"CONSTANCE: [*to herself*] A masked ball for Romeo ... and Juliet ... 'a third to make a trinity' ... I've got to buy a mask! [*to the* SERVANT] Can you lend me a few ducats?" (Act 3, Scene 3, p. 61)

"TYBALT: [*aside*] *I will withdraw; but this intrusion shall,*

"now seeming sweet, convert to bitt'rest gall.

"[TYBALT *crushes his Coors Light can in his fist, tosses it at* CONSTANCE*'s feet, and exits.* CONSTANCE *pauses in her dance with* ROMEO*, picks up the can, and recognizes it*]

"JULIET: [*aside*] Thou pretty boy, I will ungreek thee yet.

"[*intercepting* CONSTANCE]

"*If I profane with my unworthiest hand—*

"ROMEO: Hold! I saw him first.

"JULIET: Thou wouldst corrupt him.

"ROMEO: Sayst *thou?!* Thou that bedded the first doublet to o'erperch thine orchard walls?

"JULIET: Thou caitiff! I sicken of they blubb'ring boyish charm.

"ROMEO: Thou'rt in the green-eyed clutch of envy, sweet.

"JULIET: 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,' Romeo,

"for with each new lust, thou creepest close

"unto the ag'ed day when soft moist lip

"and dewy eye convert to senile rheum.

"ROMEO: Thinkst *thou* to leave a lovely corpse my dear,

"when even now the crows have footed it

"in merry measure all about thine eyes?" (Act 3, Scene 4, pp. 66-67)

"CONSTANCE: You mean you know my true identity?

"JULIET: Indeed. Thou art a deviant of Greece.

"O Constantine! O wherefore are thou bent?

"CONSTANCE: Shshshsh! Good Heavens, keep your voice down please.

"JULIET: Deny thy preference and refuse they sex;

"*Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love*,

"And henceforth never will I be a girl.

"CONSTANCE: I'm not ... a deviant, for heaven's sake.

"JULIET: Not deviant? Art thou then a timid virgin?

"Dear boy, I envy thee they bliss to come.

"CONSTANCE: I may be celibate, but I'm not exactly a virgin.

"JULIET: Tut, boyish bluster. Hast thou tasted woman?

"CONSTANCE: No!

"JULIET: Then are thy vestal sense all intact.

"O let Juliet initiate

"thy budding taste of woman's dewy rose.

"Learn how the rose becomes a sea of love:

"come part the waves and plumb Atlantic depths.

"I'll guide thee to the oyster's precious pearl ...

"we'll seek out wat'ry caves for glist'ning treasure,

"spelunk all night until we die of pleasure.

"CONSTANCE: I'm not into that sort of thing.

"JULIET: Then claim another conduit for thy use.

"CONSTANCE: Heavenly days, what's come over you?!

"You're supposed to be all innocence.

"JULIET: The time for innocence is sped!

"I'll love once more before I'm dead!

"CONSTANCE: Who said anything about dying? You're only fourteen years old.

"JULIET: Thirteen! Tomorrow I will be fourteen." (Act 3, Scene 5, pp. 68-69)

"TYBALT: A l'arme!

"CONSTANCE: Alright, then, come on! [*swishes her sword*] I trained in Cyprus you know, come on. [*swish*] hit me. [*thumping her chest*] hit me right here.

"[TYBALT *lunges.* CONSTANCE *yelps with fear and fends him off clumsily. Enter* ROMEO *in women's clothing*]

"ROMEO: *Hold Tybalt! Good* Constantine! *Put up your swords!*

"[ROMEO *comes between the combatants, raising his arms to stop them as in 'Romeo and Juliet'; but here,* TYBALT*'s sword, rather than skewering* CONSTANCE *under* ROMEO*'s arm, gets caught in the flowing fabric of* ROMEO*'s dress. CONSTANCE escapes as the two men struggle.* ROMEO *runs off.* TYBALT *looks about, swishes his sword, then runs off after* CONSTANCE]" (Act 3, Scene, 6, p. 75)

"*Act III, Scene viii*

"*Beneath Constance's balcony.*

"*Enter* ROMEO*, still in Juliet's clothing, with rope ladder.*

"*Enter* DESDEMONA*. She watches* ROMEO *toss one end of the rope ladder over a balustrade above, in an attempt to scale the wall to the balcony.*

"DESDEMONA: [*aside*] By Tybalt's own account, must this be Juliet.

"Here is the rose-hued silk ...

"but nowhere do I see the lovely sylph.

"[*to* ROMEO] What ho, I have a message for you, Lady.

"[ROMEO *sees* DESDEMONA]

"ROMEO: [*aside*] *O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!*

"DESDEMONA: Constance doth await up at the Crypt, ma'am.

"ROMEO: I am no ma'am, but man, and worship thee.

"DESDEMONA: We'd make short work of thee in Cyprus, lad." (Act 3, Scene 8, p. 81)

"DESDEMONA: Nay, come and kill.

"JULIET: Nay, stay and die.

"DESDEMONA: Nay, come!

"JULIET: Nay, stay!

"DESDEMONA: Nay kill!!

"JULIET: Nay die!!

"CONSTANCE: Nay nay!! - Nay. Just ... nay ... both of you. I've had it with all the tragic tunnel vision around here. You have no idea what — life is a hell of a lot more complicated than you think! Life — real life — is a big mess. Thank goodness. And every answer spawns another question; and every question blossoms with a hundred different answers; and if you're lucky you'll always feel somewhat confused. Life Is — ! ... Life is ...

"a harmony of polar opposites,

"with gorgeous mixed-up places in between,

"where inspiration steams up from a rich

"Sargasso stew that's odd and flawed and full

"of gems and worn-out boots and sunken ships—

"Desdemona, I thought you were different: I thought you were my friend, I worshipped you. But you're just like Othello—gullible and violent. Juliet, if you really loved me, you wouldn't want me to die. But you were more in love with death, 'cause death is easier to love. Never mind. I must have been a monumental fool to think that I could save you from yourselves ... Fool...

"DESDEMONA: Nay, thou speakst wise.

"JULIET: Aye, fools were never wise.

"DESDEMONA: Could any fool reveal, how we were wont to err?

"JULIET: Or get us to concede, what we will gladly swear?

"CONSTANCE: What's that?

"DESDEMONA: To live by questions, not by their solution.

"JULIET: To trade our certainties, for thy confusion.

"CONSTANCE: Do you really mean that?

"[JULIET and DESDEMONA nod, 'yes.']

"GHOST: [*under the stage*] Swear. Swear.

"DESDEMONA & JULIET: We swear.

"CONSTANCE: Then I was right about your plays. They were comedies after all, not tragedies. I was wrong about one thing, though: I thought only a Wise Fool could turn tragedy to comedy.

"GHOST: [*below*] Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" (Act 3, Scene 9, pp. 84-86)

"*Act III, The Epilogue*

"*Enter the* CHORUS *holding the Ghost's skeleton mask.*

"CHORUS: The alchemy of ancient hieroglyphs

"has permeated the unconscious mind

"of Constance L. and manifested form,

"where there was once subconscious dreamy thought.

"The best of friends and foes exist within,

"where archetypal shadows come to light

"and doff their monster masks when we say 'boo'.

"Where mingling and unmingling opposites

"performs a wondrous feat of alchemy,

"and spins grey matter, into precious gold.

"[*Lights and Music. The company dances.*] (Act 3, The Epilogue, p. 87)

Topics for Further Study

Choose a scene from *Goodnight Desdemona* that you feel is representative of a particular theme of the play and discuss, in an essay, its purpose and dramatic thrust. How does MacDonald go about achieving her goals in the scene? What are the key moments of humor, drama, suspense, or revelation? Which characters and which lines are most important? Cast the scene, choose a director, and act it out based on your observations. Then, analyze the scene you have produced, noting its successes and failures.

Read one of Shakespeare's comedies, such as *As You Like It* or *Much Ado about Nothing*, and one of the tragedies, such as *Macbeth*. Write a paper or give a class presentation discussing the difference between tragedy and comedy in Shakespeare's time. How do the playwright's techniques differ? What do the conventions have in common? Do you think the plays are strictly divided and have necessary outcomes, or can you see the possibility of alternate endings?

Goodnight Desdemona is associated with the feminist movement of the late twentieth century. Research some of MacDonald's possible influences as well as the state of feminism at the time the play was being written and produced. Write an essay discussing the key feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on how the movement changed in those two decades and how it affected the Canadian theater scene.

Choose another of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth*, and read it carefully. Then write a scene in which you reinvent the play and its characters in a new way. You could include a character from the present day, add a twist in the plot, provide an extra scene between those that already exist, or engage in a parody. Make your best effort to follow the language, rhythms, and structures of Elizabethan drama, including the convention of blank verse.

Compare and Contrast

1600: The first French settlers arrive in eastern Canada, but there will be no significant settlements in Toronto for more than one hundred years.

1980s: Toronto is Canada's largest city. It is the capital of the province of Ontario and is the center of Canada's English-speaking artistic culture.

Today: Toronto has suffered from the drawback in tourism after the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic in 2003. The city is still known as the economic engine of Canada, however, and it continues to grow and prosper.

1600: Queen Elizabeth I, one of England's shrewdest and most able monarchs, is nearing the end of her long and prosperous rule.

1980s: Margaret Thatcher, known as the □Iron Lady□ for her conservatism and inflexibility, is the prime minister of the United Kingdom.

Today: Tony Blair, a pioneer of the □New Labor□ movement intended to combine social services with privatization, is the British prime minister.

1600: Drama in the English language is flourishing, as Shakespeare and other playwrights continue to produce masterpieces for the London theater.

1980s: Drama in English is no longer centered in London but has spread to the many English-speaking cities, particularly Toronto and New York City.

Today: With an increased emphasis on multiculturalism, drama in English involves playwrights and actors of Jamaican, Indian, South African, and many other nationalities.

What Do I Read Next?

Shakespeare's classics *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1594) and *Othello* (c. 1603) are absorbing plays that add a great deal to one's appreciation of *Goodnight Desdemona*. Also, Constance's journey resembles that of the Danish prince in *Hamlet* (c. 1600), which follows the story of Hamlet's revenge after the murder of his father.

MacDonald's critically acclaimed *Fall on Your Knees* (1996) is the story of a family from the island of Cape Breton in Nova Scotia, Canada, in the early twentieth century. After delving into the island's world of cultural tension, it follows one of the main characters to Harlem, in New York City, where she becomes involved in the jazz scene.

Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects (1996), edited by Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan, and Dympna Callaghan, is a collection of critical essays dealing with a variety of women's issues in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

Carol Bolt's *One Night Stand* (1977) is a hit comedy-thriller by one of Canada's most influential late-twentieth-century playwrights. It tells the story of a young woman and a drifter she finds in a bar.

Tongue of a Bird (1997), by Ellen McLaughlin, is a haunting and tragic play with an all-female cast that serves as a contrast to *Goodnight Desdemona* in its expression of feminist themes. Its main character is a search-and-rescue pilot named Maxine who is trying to find a young girl in the mountains.

Further Study

Djordjevic, Igor, □, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*: From Shakespearean Tragedy to Postmodern Satyr Play,□ in *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 89-115.

Djordjevic's analysis of *Goodnight Desdemona* concentrates on the genres of tragedy and comedy as they can be applied to the play and its influences.

Honan, Park, *Shakespeare: A Life*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Honan provides a readable, well-researched, and informative account of Shakespeare's life and career, including a description of the cultural atmosphere in Elizabethan England.

Nurse, Donna Baily, □Send in the Clowns,□ in *Publisher's Weekly*, Vol. 250, No. 47, November 24, 2003, pp. 37-38.

Nurse's brief interview and biography of MacDonald touches on some of the author's influences and passions.

Stevenson, Melanie A., □Othello, Darwin, and the Evolution of Race in Ann-Marie MacDonald's Work,□ in *Canadian Literature*, No. 168, Spring 2001, pp. 34-54.

This essay discusses the issues of race and evolution in *Goodnight Desdemona* and MacDonald's other work.

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Hengen, Shannon, "Towards a Feminist Comedy," in *Canadian Literature*, No. 146, Autumn 1995, p. 97.

MacDonald, Ann-Marie, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, Grove Press, 1998, pp. 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 31, 37, 38, 50, 56, 64, 74.

Shakespeare, William, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 345.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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