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Liars and Lycanthropes: Cultural Images in *People v. Simpson*

Terry Kay Diggs*

THE SCENE: A sheltered enclave of the very rich.

THE TIME: Night. After dark, but not yet late.

(A long shot reveals a residence, strategically lit in anticipation of a night of pleasure. All seems well, but we have the uneasy sense that something, somehow, is terribly wrong.

We sense the presence of the outsider before we see him. Suddenly, a dark-gloved fist emerges, literally shooting up from nowhere. We are transfixed by the long hunting knife gripped in the powerful hand. For a long moment, the knife blade glints in the ambient light. Then a masked face emerges. Slowly, we become aware of the athletic figure of a large man.

The intruder removes his protective covering. We recognize the face of an American icon. "Honey, I'm home," the idol sneers. Clearly, this will be no domestic comedy.)

Admittedly, the scenario—a prologue to deadly violence—is a terrifying one. But it isn't what you think it is.

"Women," Albert Gibson (Tom Arnold) says in *True Lies*, the film that produced the images described above, "can't live with 'em. Can't kill 'em."¹ Yet Gibson's hopeful grin suggests that he has overlooked some desirable loophole. Gibson's sophomoric misogyny is troubling. What is far more troubling, however, is that during the summer months of

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1. TRUE LIES (Twentieth Century Fox 1994).

1994—as Nicole Brown Simpson bled to death in the courtyard of her own home—more than a million Americans laughed along with Gibson.

Commentators who have looked at the prosecution of O.J. Simpson and seen great things for feminism may be sitting a little too close to their monitors. The effect of the Trial of the Century, say these hopeful analysts, will be to curb domestic violence by making us more aware of its incidence and more punitive toward its practice. Alas, only the prospect of world peace is less likely.

The problem is that *People v. Simpson* has had no impact at all on the conditions—assuming *arguendo* the truth of the prosecution's case—that caused Nicole Brown Simpson's death. Granted, the People's evidence identifies attitudes that led to domestic violence in the Simpson case and purports to attack them. But, the attitudes that are the targets of Marcia Clark's rhetoric in Department 103, where the case was heard, are elsewhere the staples of American culture. Sold everywhere, at every hour, replicated at the speed of light, hawked with an enthusiasm usually reserved for consumer goods, those notions are the big ticket items in the American marketplace of ideas. So endemic are these perspectives to our culture that their promulgation passes unnoticed and unchecked. Thus, they persist as ideas with the capacity to kill, regardless of the fate of America's best-known running back.

The extent to which we consume through culture what we condemn in court is best illustrated by examining two entertainment products that were circulating at the very hour of Ms. Simpson's murder: *True Lies*, the blockbuster cited above, and Mike Nichols' literate film, *Wolf*.² *True Lies* is the kind of fare commonly dismissed on the basis of its guy, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and its guns. It shouldn't be. According to current projections, *True Lies* will eventually be seen by one out of every fifteen Americans, many of whom are young men of impressionable ages when it comes to gender relations. Moreover, *True Lies* was well-received by a host of reputable critics, among them Janet Maslin, who praised the film's wit and its initiation of a female star (Jamie Lee Curtis) into the lucrative action-adventure genre.

Wolf also invites us to look beneath the sheep's clothing of its genre, the erotic thriller. Admittedly, *Wolf* didn't generate Schwarzenegger's box office revenue, but it had an intelligent script, a high-grade cast (Jack Nicholson, Michelle Pfeiffer, Christopher Plummer and Kate Nelligan), and a toney director which made it the kind of film seen on Sunday afternoons by people who have passed the bar exam. What the discriminating viewer saw in *Wolf* was a fitting prelude to nine months in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

2. WOLF (Columbia 1994).

At first glance, neither *Wolf* nor *True Lies* appears to have much to do with Simpson's uniquely-90210 domestic violence. In each film, attractive male protagonists seem to face conventional enemies in straightforward plots. The racially contemptible *True Lies* pits Harry Trasker (Schwarzenegger) against Arab terrorists, predictably intent on destroying the world. *Wolf*'s Will Randall (Nicholson) is driven to outlast the yuppie jackal (James Spader) who has stolen both Randall's wife and his job. But the force of these films is less in the stories they tell than in the narrative devices they use to tell them.

Both films proceed from an idealized community of men. Will Randall's elite publishing house features women in the roles of dutiful secretaries and dotty artists. Two decades of affirmative action notwithstanding, the Omega Agency of Schwarzenegger's Harry Trasker apparently employs only two females, the spy caper's obligatory parody of James Bond's Miss Moneypenny, and an African-American woman who is told to leave when the guys' conversation turns to policy-making.

True Lies and *Wolf* were hardly the only examples of a film industry obsession with microcosms of patriarchy. In the months surrounding the *Simpson* murders, a host of period pieces—*Wyatt Earp* and its sibling *Tombstone*; *Rob Roy* and the kindred, kilted *Brave Heart*; and two twentieth-century offerings *Legends of the Fall* and *Apollo 13*—created universes in which a government of men was taken for granted, and thus passed unchallenged. Not surprisingly, the denizens of these happy worlds wrestled with codes women could not understand and two decades after the women's movement, did not much want to.

Wolf went to allegorical extremes in advocating a return to the primal that exceeded even Robert Bly's trips to the woods. But the remarkable transformation posited by the film—from literacy to lycanthropy—was hardly an isolated one. In a political environment in which the Speaker of the House argued that command belonged to the giraffe-hunters, *Wolf* merely demonstrated that even guys wearing glasses could bag their own game. Given the circumstances, O.J. Simpson's failure to recognize the difference between real life, and life in the NFL, seems not altogether unexpected.

Naturally, female stars are not entirely excluded from the films' male cosmos, but only the actresses' agents need rejoice. The rest of us must watch as thoughtful women of role-model stature are cut to the dimensions of their men. *Wolf*'s Laura (Michelle Pfeiffer) says that what she does for a living is not worth talking about, and the film reinforces that assessment by giving us no more of Laura than what she represents to the guys around her: daughter, sister, nurse, romantic ideal, and—in a characterization that is far more consistent with the previously enumerated roles than we would

like to admit—"the fuck of the decade."³ Likewise, *True Lies*' Helen Trasker (Curtis) can't break out of a boring job until her husband allows her to become his accessory in espionage.

Significantly, none of these representations occur in a vacuum. "I remember thinking, the Brown girls are going to go someplace," a school friend of Nicole Brown Simpson told *The New York Times*.⁴ Nicole seemed singularly destined for big things. "People said somebody wealthy and famous would nab her,"⁵ the friend continued. Somebody did. But it follows that a woman seen as an acquisition is treated as exactly that.

The exclusive possession of Hollywood's women—and specifically, the control of their sexuality—is a predominant objective in an all-male rivalry that never ends. As protective of turf as the National Football Conference's most-decorated Front Four, *Wolf*'s protagonist measures his losses in terms of the territory he has ceded. Predictably, the film's definitive boundary-setting occurs at the urinal of the company men's room.

True Lies gives Harry Trasker access to the kind of monitoring devices that allow him dominion over his wife—and over most of the Western Hemisphere, as well. But external control is never enough: *True Lies* stages a mock psychoanalysis session that forces Helen to reveal her innermost secrets to her man. Ultimately, *True Lies* borrows feminism's least-favorite question from Dr. Freud. "What do these women want?" the film's sidekick (Tom Arnold) asks. Not surprisingly, the film puts an Austrian guy back in the psychiatrist's chair to give women the answer.

As it happens, the films' protagonists need all the border defenses they can muster. The heroes are challenged by young newcomers, who covet the patriarch's personal and professional territory in much the same way that Ron Goldman, the young Mezzaluna Restaurant waiter and would-be actor, aspired to O.J. Simpson's B-movie status. *Wolf*'s aging executive is challenged by a young assistant who wants to be CEO. *True Lies*' super-spy faces down a used car salesman who pretends at foreign intrigue. Prepared by long custom for a fight to the death, these modern-day

3. In fairness, the film's screenplay by Jim Harrison and Wesley Strick features more refined dialogue than coarse language. The following offensive characterization occurs in a brief exchange between the film's despicable villain, Stuart Swinton (James Spader), and a gatekeeper, George (Peter Gerety), at the Alden estate.

GEORGE: May I ask your business with Miss Alden, sir?

SWINTON: My business is pleasure, George. Does she look like the fuck of the decade or what?

WOLF (Columbia 1994).

4. *Nicole Simpson Was Ready To Start New Life, Sister Says*, THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS, June 25, 1994, at A8.

5. *Id.*

patriarchs and aspirants to the throne engage in the battle of the century, regrettably, the twelfth century.

Thermonuclear Age men, we learn to our dismay, gauge their status using the yardstick of the Crusaders, that is, by their women's chastity. In both *Wolf* and *True Lies*, the protagonist's greatest professional vulnerability coincides with his wife's sexual impropriety. Indeed, sexual exclusivity is so essential to the hero's power that its absence means he is no longer a worthy bearer of society's ideals: he stops being the hero. Thus, Hollywood plotmasters go to extremes to ensure that multimillion dollar stars maintain heroic dimensions. *True Lies*' Harry Trasker remains admirable because we learn that his Helen wasn't *really* unfaithful. When *Wolf* can't redeem Will Randall's faithless wife, Charlotte, the film simply switches sexual icons: we discover that Charlotte (Nelligan) is not actually the love of Randall's life, and that the devoted Laura (Pfeiffer), is.

Because society says that a protagonist's loss of sexual exclusivity, whether actual or perceived, is potentially lethal to him, custom encourages him to avenge that loss without mercy. *True Lies*' Trasker subjects his rival to a soul-destroying denunciation in which the pitiable challenger reveals both incontinence and sexual inadequacy. In *Wolf*, Will Randall's rival whines and grovels as Randall regains the upper hand. "Don't do it to me, Will," the challenger pleads, "it will ruin me." Randall responds with a smirk, "I know."

With the hero's sexual dominion reestablished, society ratifies the hero's acts of retribution. Dedicated to self-preservation, men rejoice at the termination of those acts that diminish the potency of the protagonist and thus threaten the patriarchy itself. Appropriately, *True Lies* marks Harry Trasker's full reinstatement as the master of his wife's heart with the ultimate public spectacle, the detonation of an atomic weapon. Clearly, the enemy whose subjugation has warranted celebration at the nuclear level poses something substantially more threatening than *Wolf*'s grasping subordinate or *True Lies*' foreign zealots.

The real nemesis posited by both of the films is woman, the she-devil whose power over the individual male unmans him. The female's corrosive influence is represented as domesticity, and both films signify that threat in the same way. Early in both *Wolf* and *True Lies*, the films' protagonists submit to the consummate act of contemporary homelife: they share the bathroom basin with their working wives. It is each film's signal that the hero is not quite what he used to be. Thus, these domestic scenes provide a fictional complement to the factual acknowledgment given by Simpson at the time of his induction into the Professional Football Hall of Fame that domestic life had coincided with the end of his career.

Nevertheless, the woman is to be feared most because her salaciousness renders the hero vulnerable to loss of power through his loss of sexual

dominion: a humiliation in which the woman has played a willing role. The immutable presumption of the male universe is that the hero's woman will betray him with impunity. The only question is how soon and how often. "Do you think that makes it better to know that you betrayed me over and over to a man who meant nothing to you?" *Wolf's* Randall demands of his unfaithful wife. "Welcome to the club, man," *True Lies'* Gibson tells the duped Trasker, "nobody thinks it could happen to him the *first* time."

The films argue that falsity is as basic to female makeup as DNA. It is the kind of genetics argument one wishes Barry Scheck would cross-examine. Women are seen as inherently duplicitous creatures, sexually voracious from pubescence to senescence. When *True Lies'* teen pilfers money from her dad's wallet, the amiable Gibson suggests that the theft will fund an abortion. Of like mind, O.J. Simpson complained to Kato Kaelin that Nicole and her friends would flaunt their sexual availability in mini-skirts even after they became grandmothers.⁶

Our culture's portrait of the female lifecycle depicts a contemptible specimen unworthy of love and undeserving of respect. Thus, we come to expect that women will be treated with scorn. When *True Lies'* Trasker creates a counter-intelligence assignment for his wife, he does not order her to assume the identity of a scientist. Instead, he orders her to pretend she is a prostitute. Thirty years before *True Lies'* role-playing, Germaine Greer wrote that women could never fully understand the extent to which men hated them.⁷ Perhaps not, but a trip to Blockbuster Video might provide a few clues.

Fortunately, not all mass culture ignores the extent to which we promote ideas that are dangerous to women. Even as *People v. Simpson* lumbers to a close, Kenneth Branagh and Laurence Fishburne are preparing to tell again the great story of *Othello*. Everyone knows *Othello*, and, indeed, the play has become the prime-time pundit's favorite *Simpson* analogue. Yet the Trial of the Century suggests that regardless of how well we know Shakespeare's tragedy, we can never know it well enough.

Modern readers assume that *Othello* is about race, but that interpretation implies that the play's beauty is only skin deep. Instead, some scholars argue that Shakespeare, who lived a century before imperialism gave birth to the kind of color-based stigmatization we are accustomed to, had a difference more profound than pigmentation in mind.⁸ Ultimately,

6. *People v. Simpson*, No. BA097211, 1995 WL 128717, at *40-41 (Cal. Super. Ct. Mar. 27, 1995).

7. GERMAINE GREER, *THE FEMALE EUNUCH* 245 (1971).

8. Louis B. Wright & Virginia A. Lamar, *Introduction: The Significance of Othello to WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, OTHELLO* i, xiv (Washington Square Press 1993).

Shakespeare used skin tone to render a social construct visible. That construct was the culturally-created disparity between men and women.

Ultimately, Shakespeare's villainous Iago is less important for what he does than for what he represents. Iago represents the dominion of men, a masculine universe that is virtually indistinguishable from the male enclaves of *Wolf*, *True Lies*, or Buffalo's Rich Stadium. Better than anyone else, Iago understands the pernicious attitudes of *Othello's* Cyprus and *Simpson's* cineplexes: exclusivity, rivalry, acquisitiveness, and misogyny. Iago manipulates those viewpoints to settle a terrible score. But Iago's evil doesn't arise from individual malice alone. It is only Iago's community, Shakespeare reminds us, that makes an Iago possible.

Pitted against the social system represented by Iago is an opposing scheme of values, which is represented by marriage. Shakespeare's couples deal with each other as partners and treat each other as individuals, free of the prejudices engendered by protocol. Nevertheless, sexual parity cannot survive. Patriarchy's agent, Iago, kills Othello's marriage, as indeed he must if a system of gender-based domination is to endure. Yet the death of mutuality is not the end of *Othello*.

Shakespeare's finale leaves intact the malignant social system of Othello's world. But Shakespeare's shrewd narrative has also revealed the means by which the system works. Ultimately, the playwright's ending, Lodovico's departure to spread Othello's story, leaves us with both a clean slate and a set of options.⁹ We can dismantle deadly patriarchy, or we can continue to shore it up, blindly reinforcing its malevolent notions. The

When enemies of Othello want to abuse him, they speak opprobriously of his alien looks and wonder that Desdemona could love so strange a man, but that is part of the reality of the characterization, not a hint on Shakespeare's part of 'racism.' The unhappy times when men would read some suggestion of racial prejudice into every piece of literature concerned with alien characters lay some centuries ahead.

Id. See, e.g., SHAKESPEARE: THE TRAGEDIES (Robert B. Heilman ed., 1984).

By taking literally conventional fairness and darkness, Shakespeare has given a new dimension to an artificial arrangement so trite as to appear meaningless: part of the shock involved in this marriage relies upon literary as well as upon social conventions.

Rosalie L. Colie, *Othello: The Problematics of Love*, in SHAKESPEARE: THE TRAGEDIES, *supra*, at 96.

We know more specifically, I take it, that Othello's blackness means something. But what specifically does it mean? Mean, I mean, to him—for otherwise it is not Othello's color that we are interested in but some generalized blackness, meaning perhaps 'sooty' or 'filthy,' as elsewhere in the play. . . . Then how does he understand it? As the color of the romantic hero.

Stanley Cavell, *On Othello*, in SHAKESPEARE: THE TRAGEDIES, *supra*, at 109.

9. Lodovico is described as the kinsman of Desdemona's father, Brabantio. It is he who, as the representative of civic government, ends *Othello* with the community admonition common to Shakespeare's tragedies.

Trial of the Century suggests that we have made our choice. Sadly, it is the worst choice for women.

By identifying *Simpson* as the vehicle of our hopes for women, we have chosen Iago as our champion. Again and again, the trial has worked as Iago worked, repeating Iago's rituals and employing Iago's prejudices. Shakespeare's villain wielded a woman's life like an election year tool, seeking, as *Simpson's* Gil Garcetti sought, political confirmation in the comeuppance of a national hero. Moreover, Shakespeare's villain stimulated childish rivalries, transforming male discourse in Cyprus into the kind of silly posturing that dominated Judge Ito's courtroom. Most importantly, Iago induced his society to see in one flawed hero's guilt, the explanation of an abused woman's death. In this, Iago diverted attention from a culture dangerous to everyone.

Simpson is not *Othello*, sportswriter Ann Sjoerdsma has argued.¹⁰ Sjoerdsma is right. It isn't, or it isn't yet. In order to do the work of Shakespeare's tragedy, our public inquiry would have to proceed beyond the conviction or acquittal of O.J. Simpson. We would have to identify the images and ideas that made Nicole Brown Simpson's murder possible. We would have to denounce their sale. We would have to make women truly safe.

One year after Nicole Brown Simpson's death, it is summer again. *First Knight* is playing at the Plaza. The display poster announces: "A King. A Warrior. Their Greatest Battle Would Be for Her Love."¹¹ I recognize it as a "Girl-Meets-King, King-Meets-Rival, Girl-Deceives-King, Deceit-Destroys-Western-Civilization" kind of movie. I don't buy a ticket. Oddly enough, I seem to have heard that story somewhere before.

10. Ann G. Sjoerdsma, *Sports Culture Denegrates Women*, THE BALTIMORE SUN, June 26, 1994, at 1E.

11. *FIRST KNIGHT* (Columbia 1995).