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The Oldest Dance: Movement and Gender Performance In *Huapango*, a Huastec *Othello*

by

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*Huapango*, a Mexican Othello

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*Huapango*, a 2004 adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* set in the Mexican Huasteca

directed by Ivan Lipkies, announces immediately that it is not really about *Othello*. The first

scene is noisy and colorful: in the Casa de Cultura building in Tamaulipas, a group of
townspeople arranged in partnered couples practices its *huapango* dance routine. The women
wear flowing, brightly-patterned skirts, which they frequently hold fanned out into complete
half-circles. Both genders sport heeled dance shoes, which they use to strike the floor in the
vigorous, complex step rhythms of *huapango*. This initial emphasis on dance contrasts strikingly
with Shakespeare’s *Othello*, preserved in the Oxford World’s Classics edition, in which dance
plays almost no thematic role. Instead of beginning with a devious Iago already on the prowl in
the Venetian night, the film introduces dance as a cheerful, energetic expression of Huastec
regional pride, practiced with spritely music in sunlit rooms. The dance teacher states this
explicitly: she tells the group to practice hard even though they won’t be getting paid, because
they will be representing their region’s art. Mexican artistic identity is immediately at stake,
rather than conniving and conspiracy.

But Iago is also not absent from the first scene. Santiago leers at his beautiful dance
partner Julia (Desdemona) throughout the opening dance sequence, and uses their choreography
as an excuse to grab her waist a little too tightly. Immediately, dance becomes a performance not
only of regional skill and pride, but also a platform for sexual dynamics to play out. Dance might
have little obvious relationship to the text of *Othello* at first blush. But as “a vertical expression
of a horizontal desire,” it in fact becomes an ideal, visually-arresting vehicle to channel the sexual jealousy that drives Shakespeare’s play. More broadly, the plot of *Othello* is a frame that the film uses to address Mexican gender relations. In *Huapango*, traditional *huapango* dance, and movement more generally, become means to explore the role of gender in Mexican national, regional, and cinematic identity.

*Huapango* finds its place in Mexican film culture through its aesthetic identification with *telenovela* melodrama. This highly popular Mexican (and Latin American) television genre, sibling to the soap opera, employs melodramatic acting to intensify audience reactions to characters’ passions of romance and revenge.¹ Given Mexican cinematic tastes, Shakespeare’s *Othello* is ripe for adaptation: its extremes of love and anger, intense sexual jealousy, and betrayals by those who are closest make the play a potent recipe for melodrama. In *telenovela*, the aiming of guns, dramatic slaps across the face, and long close-ups on actors’ infuriated or woebegone faces are par for the course. Each appears in *Huapango*, most notably with extended views of Santiago’s envy, Julia’s horror, and Otilio’s anguish writ large on their faces. While the tropes of melodrama do not overwhelm the movie, they clearly mark the movie as “familiar” to Mexican viewers.

However, even though *Huapango*’s “external” aesthetic features identify it with national film culture, its “internal” artistic content places it strongly within the Huasteca region. The film turns on *huapango*, a *ballet folklórico* (folk dance) specific to the region of Huasteca, and especially the Huastec state of Tamaulipas, in northeastern Mexico. A *huapango* band generally consists of three instrumentalists, playing instruments such as harp, violin, guitar, maracas, and the *jarana*, a twangy, guitar-like instrument which gives the music a shrill core.² The music is

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lively and upbeat, and dancers perform quick, intricate steps on a wooden sounding board stage that amplifies the stamping rhythm. The sprightly music, bright costuming, and constant drumbeat of the *huapango* dance steps craft the film’s space as distinctly Huastec in character. Other elements of the mise-en-scène echo and reinforce dance as the film’s structural center: the warm, sunny color palette of the film picks up on the pinks and yellows of the female dancers’ skirts, and the striking of the dance steps bleeds into the mechanical striking of a sewing machine.

*Huapango* music also features in the film in another distinctive guise: the extraordinary Huastec tradition of competitive extemporaneous musical verse rhyming. At a *fandango*, or music-and-dance festival, two singers accompanied by *huapango* bands compete, sometimes for hours, trading verses that they creatively invent or adapt on the spot. They riff on the music and on each other’s themes, trying to outdo each other until one runs out of wit. Mostly men (and some women) participate in the contest, which can sometimes become quite ribald; a competition may often center on two men vying musically and rhetorically for a desirable female onlooker.

While the film mostly focuses on the dancing side of *huapango*, it also nods to the verse contest. At intervals throughout the film, anonymous *huapango* verses float over the scene as part of the score, commenting on and responding to the action and thematic drift of the movie like a Greek chorus. More notably, two male singers hold a relaxed competition in a brief but colorful scene. They make comic jibes at each other’s sexual habits and, in responding to each other’s quips, emphasize their own prowess. They jokingly spar for sexual privileges with the sharp-tongued, sixty-something dance teacher, who looks on and laughs.

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The scene serves little function in the film beyond showing off the full artistic expression of such a rich source of regional pride. The film has a homegrown quality that may stem in part from its middle-of-the-road production values; the dancers are “regular people” wearing the clothes they might if off-screen. The film is deeply local; it has nary a shred of Hollywood polish. And yet even though this particular ballet folklórico is Huastec through and through, it also suggests a kind of pride in—and a search for—an essential national Mexicanness, a *mexicanidad*. When discussing the food the town will sponsor for the upcoming regional *huapango* dance competition, Otilio specifically rejects the “pizza and hamburgers” that were served at the last competition in favor of traditional Huastec foods. This offhand reference alludes to the exportation of American capitalism into Mexico. It suggests that even this deeply regionally specific film pays tribute to a larger Mexican national project that is seeking to preserve (and create) its heritage in its own image—even if the “authentic Mexico” portrayed onscreen is somewhat contrived.

As Carol Mejia LePerle suggests in her critical essay “Choreographing Culture,” it is not just *huapango* dance that structures the drama—it is movement in general. When the plot begins, both Otilio, a wealthy, older rancher, and his young bride Julia are full of vigor and motion. At their wedding, just before the bride and groom start their dance, Julia proudly declares (to Santiago’s chagrin) that henceforth, Otilio will be her only dance partner. But in a bad rodeo accident soon after the ceremony, Otilio shatters his leg, and is confined to his bed to convalesce, stuck in place with an enormous bolted plaster cast. Julia initially plans to leave the dance troupe and care for her husband, but the community members (and Otilio himself) persuade her to continue doing what she loves, as she is their best dancer and their best chance at success in the upcoming regional competition.

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Otilio is isolated in his dark room, immobile; Julia moves freely out and about, and what is more, she dances. They did not even have time to consummate their marriage before the accident. Otilio’s cast means that he is now physically incapable of doing so. The cast itself is a “parody phallus,” implying physical impotence, but also emotional impotence. Julia is at liberty to go where she pleases, which is to say sleep with whomever she pleases—and he can do nothing about it. In his fragile state Otilio does not have the emotional resources to deal with even the suggestion of infidelity on the part of a wife he has not yet “taken possession” of. Arguably this iteration of Othello offers even more fertile circumstances for Santiago to “abuse [Otilio’s] ears” (1.3.384), than the play as originally imagined, which seems to provide little foregrounding for Othello’s descent into jealousy beyond Iago’s machinations. As LePerle insightfully suggests, an Otilio sitting on the floor of his room in the corner, wracked with physical and emotional pain, literalizes Othello’s dread that he “keep[s] a corner in the thing I love / For others’ uses” (3.3.275-6). Unlike in the play, Santiago does not so much plant the seed of sexual suspicion in Otilio’s mind, but instead feeds on Otilio’s existing paranoia.

The third player in this deadly huapango trio is indeed Santiago himself. Dance, a heightening of human movement that emphasizes the body as the source of art, is the axis on which this movie turns—and Santiago and Julia are dance partners. In the play, Iago’s motivations are opaque—or nonexistent. The reasons he gives for seeking to destroy Othello’s marriage, career, and sanity, such as his thwarted desire for professional advancement or vague suspicion that Othello slept with his wife, seem flimsy, almost constructions imposed on him by

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6 Burnett, World Cinema, 109.
7 Burnett suggests, cleverly, that the love triangle of Otilio-Julia-Santiago echoes the traditional huapango music trio consisting of two men and a woman, making the symbolism of the movie’s title that much deeper (World Cinema, 96).
Shakespeare to give some form or shape to his psychological emptiness. If he has any motivations at all, they are more cosmological in nature; his behavior is almost a necessary outgrowth of shape of the world as he knows it: “We cannot all be masters, nor all masters / cannot be truly followed” (1.1.43-4).

In contrast, Santiago is furnished with an unambiguous motivation that is almost entirely extratextual. In true melodramatic fashion, he states the terms of the movie, by introducing a radical revelation in the very first scene: during a grand pause in the dance, when clasping Julia in the tight embrace of a partnered pose, he stares at her face and says, “I am in love.” Julia chooses not to hear the obvious implication, and responds over-cheerfully, “How wonderful! I am in love too!” referring, of course, to her recent engagement to Otilio that she will shortly announce to the group. Santiago has clearly fallen in love with Julia through dancing with her, and he uses the sexual associations of heterosexual partnered dance as a platform to press his suit. His hungry leer bespeaks a barely-concealed desire to consume her sexually—his passion for Julia is not benign.

Santiago is both the third pin in the triangle and Otilio’s perfect opposite. While Otilio lies frustrated in bed, Santiago stands frustrated on the dance floor. Both of them yearn to possess Julia. They are mirror images of one another: virile masculinity consumed by jealousy, registered through movement and stasis. Santiago is jealous of Otilio, and Otilio’s jealousy is misdirected at the nameless man he imagines will cuckold him—ostensibly Felipe, the movie’s Cassio, but actually Santiago. Since dancing is a synonym for sex in this movie, Santiago takes a mean gratification from dancing with Julia, while Otilio’s impotent anger burns. Before the huapango competition, Santiago presses a kiss on the lips of a shocked and unwilling Julia. And

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8 While close-reading of Iago’s (lack of) motivations is not my object here, Stanley Edgar Hyman devotes an entire book to the topic, Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of his Motivation.
in the end, it is Santiago who helps bring about Julia’s death, by poisoning Otilio’s ear with suggestions of her infidelity: essentially taking Julia away from Otilio in another form. In this film, if Santiago can’t have her, then no one can.

What resonates throughout the movie is, indeed, an experience of damaged masculinity. As Sergio de la Mora suggests in *Cinemachismo*, his critical work on masculinities in Mexican film, “Cinema was instrumental in the invention of the Mexican macho: virile, brave, proud, sexually potent, and physically aggressive.”9 It is a masculinity that is deeply tied to *mexicanidad*, Mexicans’ understanding of their essential Mexicanness. *Machismo* structures the Mexican state just as the Mexican state structures *machismo*, investing each with virile power. As classic Mexican film theorist Charles Ramírez Berg articulates in *Cinema of Solitude*, *machismo* “is not just an entrenched social-sexual tradition but a reciprocal ideological agreement between the individual male and the Mexican state, empowering each…the male gains a favored place in the patriarchal system while the state accumulates political might.”10 He suggests that this heavily patriarchal form of masculinity can be positive, for instance when it comes to feeding and protecting the family, but also deeply destructive, in its attitudes toward violence and sexual ownership of women. It defines itself against the homosexual other.1112 As de la Mora insightfully observes, in cinema and in life, maintaining this paradigm of perfect masculinity requires constant performance, constant reassertion of masculine status, lest the illusion fall to pieces.13

9 Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film*, 7.
12 The film enforces anti-gay norms in the *huapango* verse contest, when “harmless” little ditties gain the more sinister aspect of conventional homophobia (in the sense of “perform this sexual act, or else I’ll think you’re gay…”).
Huapango is a series of overt macho performances traded off between Otilio and Santiago, many of which are inscribed in movement and physical prowess. Otilio, a wealthy ranchero, is the veritable embodiment of high-class masculinity not just in Mexico, but specifically in the Huasteca. Given his rancher status, it is not surprising that some of his most visually-arresting performances involve horsemanship and bull-riding. Just after the wedding ceremony, in the scenic slot that in the United States would feature the happy couple speeding away in a beribboned car, Otilio mounts his stallion and gives the wedding guests a triumphant display of his horsemanship. It is both a theatrical exhibition of his talent at a traditionally masculine physical skill, and a prefiguring of another kind of “riding” that will take place that night. Indeed, he soon scoops Julia up and places her, sidesaddle, in front of him on the horse, and rides away followed by two mounted “retainers.” For Mark Thornton Burnett, this is a literalization of Iago’s graphic picture of Othello and Desdemona making “the beast with two backs” (1.1.116). Shortly thereafter, in the move that will lead to his downfall, he decides to participate in an impromptu rodeo while still drunk from the wedding. He rides the raging, thrashing bull, its undulating motions resonating with machismo, sex, and dance, until he loses his grip and falls to the ground.

Santiago is also the height of Mexican masculinity: he is tall, muscular, and an excellent dancer, a proxy for being good in bed. When he learns that Julia is engaged, his primary experience is not of loss of a woman he loves and appreciates for her uniqueness and intrinsic goodness, but of damage to his macho sense of self. In a private conversation with a friend, he complains that “I always win…,” so losing in this instance is a profound injury. Indeed, for him, Julia is a sexual prize rather than a full human being. After Julia’s revelation of her engagement,

14 Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, Exits from the Labyrinth, 183.
15 Mark Thornton Burnett, Shakespeare and World Cinema, 105.
he jealously steals the hand-embroidered shirt Otilio gave her from her dance bag, and rips it in half. In the disturbing—and heavily melodramatic—scene that comes next, he visits the private shrine he has built to her, which is replete with Catholic religious imagery: photographs, roses, lit candles. In an act reminiscent of witchcraft or folk magic, he places her picture in a piece of cloth, tears it up, pours salt on it, and throws the tied bundle in the lake. His entire affect is not of a man who has actually come to know, love, and lose a woman, but of a man whose pride has been injured and sexual fantasy thwarted.

_Huapango_ offers social commentary on how violent and abusive _machismo_ can become through its emphasis on overconsumption of alcohol. Each main male character drinks to excess at least once in the film. At the wedding, Santiago becomes aggressive as he drinks shot after shot of hard liquor; the wedding is also where we discover that Felipe (Cassio) is an alcoholic, and while he tries to abstain he is susceptible to homosocial pressures to drink. Once Santiago sobers up, he quickly turns his peers’ propensity for drink to his advantage, employing alcohol as a tool in his revenge plot at various intervals in the film. He generously donates a flask to Otilio at his bedside, and pushes hard alcohol on Felipe when he is at a bar dancing with prostitutes, with disastrous consequences. He even orchestrated the rodeo after the wedding, calling for the wildest bulls to be brought out, knowing both that Otilio hadn’t sobered up yet and that he would still feel compelled to show off his skill.¹⁶

The alcohol motif in _Huapango_ is a direct reference to the Oxford text, in that Felipe meets his downfall in much the same way as Shakespeare’s Cassio. But within the Mexican context of the film, it gains deeper, more distressing subtext. As Burnett notes, Mexico has some of the highest rates of domestic abuse in the world, often related to a toxic combination of

¹⁶ Which suggests that other males are at least unconsciously aware of their peers’ struggles for secure masculinity.
alcohol and *machismo*. Otilio calls Julia a pig and throws an empty bottle against the wall. For a Mexican audience, the curses and shattering of glass might be all too familiar.

Where, indeed, is Julia in all of this? Much of this analysis has addressed Mexican maleness, and indeed, throughout the film Julia is mostly *perceived*. The *macho* gaze is an oppressive presence throughout the film. Just as the men must constantly perform and reinstate their masculinity, Julia is beholden—in their eyes—to traditional paradigms of Mexican femininity. Like *machismo*, Mexican femininity is also bound up in *mexicanidad*. And embedded in Mexican understandings of womanhood is an especially intense version of the virgin-whore complex. Not only must a woman be a virgin, she must emulate The Virgin, or the revered patron saint of Mexico, Our Lady of Guadalupe. On the other hand, loss of virginity outside the context of marriage, whether consensually or not, consigns a Mexican woman to whoredom. But not only is she a whore, she is a spiritual descendent of the original Whore, La Malinche.

La Malinche is the name given to the mythic Nahua Indian princess who in the sixteenth century became the mistress of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish invader. She performed the crucial service of interpreting between the conquered and the conquerors, and gave birth to some of the first *mestizo* children. La Malinche has a conflicted legacy because she is both the mother of “mixed-race” modern Mexicans, and also the harlot who sold her people out through sexual treachery. In Mexican film, female sexual betrayal is also national betrayal. The Manichean paradigm of Virgin-Whore femininity, which appears (and is problematized) throughout Mexican film of the twentieth century, is the perfect sexual fantasy of a *macho* cinematic gaze. The only alternatives offered are the desexualized mother and sister figures, who in this film appear as two different iterations of Emilia.

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Julia’s tragedy is bound up in this Mexican paradox of femininity. She begins the movie literally virginal, and remains that way until the end, since she and Otilio never have the chance to consummate their marriage. Santiago views her in this way—his religious shrine makes far too much sense if he imagines her as a Virgin-like sex-object. For him, her virginity is the fantasy. Unlike Santiago, Otilio seems to see her personhood and love her for it (which makes his machismo initially more benign), even as he essentializes her virginity. Immediately, however, when Santiago intimates that Julia may not be as pure as she seems, she is repositioned for Otilio into the Whore category. In the play, there is an artful subtlety and gradualism about Iago’s persuasion which makes Othello’s descent into jealous rage seem more reasonable, if not excusable. In the movie, the transition is immediate—it only takes one persuasive attempt on Santiago’s part to turn Otilio’s head. A commonality between both iterations of Othello is that Desdemona is never present in the scene. The construction of Julia/Desdemona’s sexuality takes place in her absence.

On her own, Julia is a cheerful, friendly woman who loves to dance and is beloved by her peers. In brief feminist interludes, she is seen out and about without her husband, specifically in the dance studio and having evening drinks with her friends. Later, after Otilio physically abuses her, she tells her (male, probably gay) friend tearfully that she plans to divorce him. She delivers this statement multiple times and without equivocation, and it is her friend who convinces her, fatally, to reconsider and go back to him. As a practitioner of the Huastec ballet folklórico, she embodies positive feminine mexicanidad. But as both a symbol of Mexicanness and a seeming adulteress, she has performed double sexual betrayal, on both her husband and her nation.

These cinematic threads of dancing, sex, and mexicanidad merge in the final scene, in which Otilio strangles Julia. The huapango dance competition is going on, and the Tamaulipas
troupe has just won the team portion of the contest. There is an intermission, after which the best individual couples will compete—naturally, this means Julia and Santiago. At her friend’s behest, Julia takes this brief window of opportunity to run home to see Otilio and try to make up with him, and as a result a different pair of Tamaulipas dance partners is given her competition slot (Santiago is furious). The shots begin to cut between Otilio and Julia in their bedroom, and the corresponding couple on the dance floor.

Like the woman dancing, Julia wears her huapango costume, complete with heeled patent-leather dance shoes and flowers woven through her braids. The couple dances in front of cheering crowds, executing the distinctive tap-like steps of huapango. The scene cuts to Otilio forcibly lifting Julia, violently recapitulating the dance moves. He throws her on the bed, lies on top of her, and strangles her while kissing her, in an act that resembles rape as much as murder. Passionate love and furious jealousy intermingle. Melodramatic close-ups of faces abound. The terrified Julia beats her fists on her husband’s breast to stop him, recreating the rhythmic beat of the dancers’ steps on the huapango dance floor. As Otilio metaphorically consummates his marriage, he literally consummates his jealousy and his injured manhood, by murdering his bride in the physical language of Mexican dance.

Once he learns the torturous truth of what he has done, he puts a gun to his head, and lays himself to die across Julia’s body. She has been arranged beautifully, in state, as if on a funeral bier, with candles, flowers, and hands clasped over her breast. She is a virgin once again, death having had “no power yet upon [her] beauty.”

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20 It is worth noting that the costume is designed to look like traditional native Indian leather clothing, but understanding this would require a whole other essay.
21 I have borrowed a line here from Romeo and Juliet, 5.3.92-3.
Works Cited


