

## The Role of Women in *Othello*: A Feminist Reading

There are only three women in 'Othello': Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. The way that these women behave and conduct themselves is undeniably linked to the ideological expectations of Shakespeare's Elizabethan society and to the patriarchal Venetian society that he creates. These notes will explore some of the ways in which the female characters are presented in the play.

### **Women as possessions**

Following his hearing of Brabantio's complaint and Othello's defence, the Duke eventually grants permission for Desdemona to accompany Othello to Cyprus. Othello speaks to his ensign Iago, ironically describing him as a man of 'honesty and trust', informing the Duke that 'To his conveyance I assign my wife' (I.3.283). Desdemona, as Othello's wife, is treated as his possession: he implies that she is a commodity to be guarded and transported.

This is, however, by no means peculiar to Othello: the first Senator, wishing Othello well, concludes by hoping that he will 'use Desdemona well' (I.3.288). The word 'use' seems to connote the phrase 'look after', but also supports the Venetian expectation of women - that they are to bow to the wills of their husbands who may utilise them as they wish. Moreover, the function of women within marriage is also delineated by Othello's 'loving' words to Desdemona in Act II: 'Come, my dear love,/The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue' (II.3.8-9). Marriage is described as an act of 'purchase': a woman is bought by her husband, effectively as a favour, and is expected to fulfil his sexual desires in return for the privilege.

Iago's desire for revenge on Othello is, in part, dictated by his view of women as possessions. He believes that 'it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets/He's done my office' (I.3.381-2), suggesting that Othello has slept with his wife Emilia. It could be argued, however, that Iago exhibits little love for his wife, insulting her in public and ultimately killing her himself. It is simply the thought that 'the lusty Moor/hath leaped into my seat' (II.1.286-7) which drives him mad, the thought that Othello has used a possession that belongs to him. Compounding this theory is the fact that Iago refers to his wife metaphorically in these two instances: she is his 'office' and his 'seat'; she is objectified and deprived of her humanity.

Moreover, in revenge for Othello's supposed act, Iago wishes to be 'evened with him, wife for wife' (II.1.290). By sleeping with Desdemona, he believes that they will then be equal. The feelings of Desdemona and Emilia are

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completely disregarded in his plotting. The women are merely objects to be used in order to further his own desires. Although Iago is an extreme example, he nonetheless demonstrates, through his thinking, the fact that women, in both Elizabethan and Venetian society, are perceived as possessions, secondary to the lofty plans and desires of men.

### **Women as submissive**

Some modern feminist critics see Desdemona as a hideous embodiment of the downtrodden woman. Whether this is actually the case will be explored later in these notes. Suffice it to say, there is a large body of evidence to support this critical stance. Desdemona herself declares that 'I am obedient' (III.3.89), continuing to obey Othello's orders from the early 'happy' phase of their relationship through to the later stages of his jealous ravings. Even when he orders Desdemona to go to her bed towards the end of Act IV, she still replies with the submissive 'I will, my lord' (IV.3.9). In her final breath she still remains true to her husband, saying 'Commend me to my kind lord' (V.2.125) and providing Othello with an alibi that he does not use. She appears to have completely accepted her role as subordinate and obedient wife.

Arguably a much stronger character, Emilia also indicates that she is aware of her 'proper' role in society. When revealing Iago's plotting at the end of the play, she states that 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now' (V.2.195). Although going on to betray her husband, she still feels the need to explain why she is deviating from accepted behaviours. Bianca expresses a similar sentiment, consoling herself when Cassio spurns her by arguing that 'I must be circumstanced' (III.4.199): she feels compelled by the laws of society to be 'circumstanced' - to 'put up with it' - implying that she has no other choice. Society weighs heavily on the shoulders of these women; they feel that they must support the men and defer to them, even if the actions of the men are questionable.

Brabantio's opinions of women appear to represent Venetian ideology. Speaking of Desdemona before she erred, he describes her as 'perfection', 'Of spirit still and quiet' and 'A maiden never bold' (I.3.95-97). By expressing these qualities of women in the masculine domain of the Venetian senate, Brabantio compounds and develops the traditional expectations of women in a patriarchal society. Moreover, when she marries Othello, going against his wishes and therefore the ideal mould of woman, he describes her as erring 'Against all rules of nature' (I.3.100). Venetian society presents its own social

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beliefs as immutable laws of nature. It is 'natural' for women to be feminine and to do as their husbands and fathers tell them. It is 'unnatural' for them to do anything else. This Venetian concept was also an Elizabethan and pre-Elizabethan belief, and was widely understood by Shakespeare's audiences. Today, feminists argue that it is not 'natural' for women to be 'feminine', that history has tried to camouflage its social expectations of women as part of the laws of nature. The women of Othello, however, are pre-Feminism, and seem to only compound the ideological expectations of what it is to be a woman through their own behaviour.

### **Women can be powerful**

This is not to say, however, that the women of the play fail to question men at all. As she talks to Desdemona at the end of Act IV, Emilia is fairly damning in her opinion of men. In a speech reminiscent of Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew eyes?', Emilia argues that women are physically no different to men:

'Let husbands know,  
Their wives have sense like them; they see and smell,  
And have their palates both for sweet and sour  
As husbands have' (IV.3.92-5)

She goes on to say that in addition to sharing some identical physicalities, they also suffer from the same 'affections,/Desires for sport, and frailty' (IV.3.100) as men. The only difference, Emilia implies, is that men are mentally weaker: it is 'frailty that thus errs' (IV.3.98). This links to her earlier description of the appetite of mankind, that 'They eat us hungerly [men], and when they are full,/They belch us' (III.4.101-2). Emilia suggests that men are brutish and simplistic, unable to control their desires with logical thought. It is perhaps ironic that the actions of Iago and Othello in this play confirm her arguments.

These opinions, however, are given to Desdemona in moments of privacy. Emilia does not express such opinions in the company of men. Ironically, it is Desdemona who exhibits some power in public, making powerful use of language when explaining to her father, in front of other Venetian senators, that her 'duty' (I.3.182) is now owed to Othello. It could be argued, however, that even in this instance, Desdemona still fails to assert herself: although she disagrees with her father, she couches this in terms of merely switching her 'duty' from father to husband. The issue of the 'duty' itself remains unquestioned. This is because it is so ideologically embedded that women do

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not seem to consider any other possibility, other than, as these notes have shown, in private conversation with one another.

### **Women as temptresses**

This is not to say, however, that women in Othello do not exhibit any signs of wielding power. Othello, when talking of his wife, often seems pre-occupied with matters of the flesh. Bemoaning the fact that he did not know earlier of his wife's supposed infidelity, Othello argues that he would have been happier 'if the general camp,/Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,/So I had nothing known' (III.3.342-4). He appears to be obsessed with Desdemona's sexuality. On his way to murder his wife, he states that 'Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted' (V.1.36). The repetition of the word 'lust', combined with the sexual associations of Desdemona's bed and the violent plosives and sibilants of this line, reflects and draws attention to Othello's preoccupation with sensual matters.

This preoccupation is partly driven by the fact that Desdemona wields so much sexual power over him. Even Cassio refers, jokingly, to Desdemona as 'our great Captain's Captain' (II.1.75), implying that she is the only individual capable of controlling and taming Othello. Desdemona uses this when attempting to persuade Othello to reinstate Cassio: she tells the latter that 'My lord shall never rest' (III.3.22) until she has changed his mind, an indication of the tenacity of the woman. Attempting to change his mind, Desdemona is not frightened to use her position and sexuality:

'Tell me, Othello. I wonder in my soul  
What you would ask me that I should deny,  
Or stand so mammering on?' (III.3.68-70)

In this instance, she refers to her own unquestioning desire to please Othello, implying that he cannot love her as she loves him if he is able to refuse her what she wants. Othello responds with the interestingly oxymoronic term of endearment 'Excellent wretch' (III.3.90), suggesting that he is aware that her manipulation of him is fairly 'wretched', yet finds it 'excellently' compelling.

Later in the play, however, Othello ceases to find Desdemona's sexual power so entertaining. Speaking to Iago about his planned murder of Desdemona, Othello is adamant that he will 'not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again' (IV.1.203-5). As far as Othello is concerned, if he is tempted into conversation and interaction with his wife, then her overpowering sexuality will deter him from the right and inevitable course of

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action. Her considers her to be a sexual hazard, a strumpet intent on using her body to blind and deceive him. Male society, in addition to constructing women as second-rate citizens, also constructs their sexual allure as evil.

### **Women as ‘whores’**

Othello’s fear of Desdemona’s sexuality erupts into slanderous abuse on a number of occasions. He refers to her as ‘whore’ (III.3.356), a ‘subtle whore’ (IV.2.20) and a ‘cunning whore’ (IV.2.88), in addition to multiple references to her as a ‘strumpet’. Bianca is described by Iago as a ‘housewife’ (IV.1.95) and ‘strumpet’ (IV.1.97), although there is no evidence to suggest that she actually is a prostitute. When she reveals his part in the horrific events of Act V, Iago vents his fury upon Emilia, labelling her a ‘villainous whore’ (V.2.227). Admonishing his wife for being a nag in Act II, Iago goes on to compound this stereotype by suggesting that all women are not as they appear. He seems to believe that all women are, essentially, ‘wild-cats’ (II.1.109) and ‘housewives’ (II.1.111). All three women of the play are accused of prostitution and inappropriate sexual conduct, yet it appears that none of them are guilty. As male society falls apart in Cyprus, its constituent members seem to vent their spleen and anger by labelling all of the female characters ‘whore’. When things go wrong, it appears to be acceptable for men to blame the women.

### **What is the role of women?**

The patriarchal Venetian society presented in Othello, moulded on the ideology of Elizabethan England, seems to put women firmly in their place. Men consider women to be possessions, who ought to remain submissive and meek at all times. The only power that women do seem to be able to wield – their sexual power - is considered to be an ‘evil’ which must be resisted by the men in society. Men seem free to be able to refer to women as ‘whores’ and get away with it. The language that Shakespeare gives to his female characters suggests that they have internalised society’s expectations of them, and apart from in moments of private conversation, behave as men expect, believing this to be ‘natural’.

There is a suggestion, however, that women are beginning to question the validity of unchecked male authority. These notes have considered Emilia’s seemingly feminist opinions, but it is Desdemona, who in conversation with Emilia, indicates that the tide may be finally turning:

‘Nay, we must think men are not gods’ (III.4.144)

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By definition, this suggests that Desdemona has certainly perceived men to be god-like figures in the past, but indicates that her experiences with Othello have taught her a lesson. It is a clear that the actions and language of Shakespeare's three female characters, although seemingly subservient, signify a tentative step towards an egalitarian society.