

Othello as a Domestic Tragedy: Marriage and Moral Extremism

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In *Othello*, Shakespeare challenges typical representations of women and marriage of the time by depicting two contrasting styles of marriage and portraying both female and male characters with equally complex morals and emotions. The complexity of the female characters emphasizes the injustice of their treatment by the male characters. Othello, while the title character, is not the only subject of tragedy in the play. Part of the tragic nature of *Othello* stems from the society's treatment of women as less than human, without complexity or agency. The whole community shares responsibility for allowing domestic violence to continue and escalate. Female characters in *Othello* are dehumanized, especially within the context of marriage, and this dehumanization spirals into tragedy.

Shakespeare calls the common dichotomous view of women into question with his complex female characters. In a traditional outlook on women espoused by writers such as Augustine and Dante, women are either the Madonna or the whore, the goddess or the slut, chaste or a "strumpet" (5.1.122). There is no middle ground acceptable for women. Only perfection in chastity and faithfulness is acceptable, yet no one can reach perfection. Such extremism is unrealistic and creates impossible standards. If only two options are allowed, the imperfect woman is immediately evil. If women do not reach the perfection expected of them, they are outcasts and not generally worth considering to many classic male authors. As Sara Munson Deats (2002) notes, many interpretations of Desdemona's character even now play into this dichotomy: "The hagiographic commentators depict a saintly Desdemona, with a passivity verging on catatonia; the demonizing commentators portray an overconfident Desdemona, with an aggressiveness approaching shrewishness" (241). Critics often approach reading *Othello* expecting perfection of Desdemona. If they see anything they dislike, they begin to villainize her.

Shakespeare, however, breaks the dichotomy and creates much more realistic female characters. S.N. Garner (2003) says that Shakespeare designed Desdemona to be "neither goddess nor slut," "human rather than divine." While Desdemona is not an adulteress as Othello comes to think, she also does not fit into the narrow definition of the ideal woman we associate with the time. She brazenly asserts herself in front of the Senate to defend her marriage, she is excited to have sex and fulfill the "rites for which I love him" (1.3.256), and she banters easily with the crass Iago. In her description of Desdemona, Deats says, "In the first three acts of the play, therefore, Shakespeare has created in Desdemona an oxymoronic blend of boldness and docility, sophistication and naivete, sensuality and chastity, a formidable and independent woman who challenges the dominant feminine ideals of the period" (243). Desdemona is incredibly well-rounded and multifaceted, commonly doing the unexpected. The areas where she does not fulfill expectations are the areas Iago exploits. Having come to view Desdemona as his beautiful, innocent, young wife, Othello is easily persuaded of her unfaithfulness when she is

outspoken about Cassio's fate and does not keep careful track of her linens. He initially has a very high opinion of her and equally high expectations: "He has romanticized Desdemona, as she has him" (Garner). Desdemona views her husband as noble and does not expect him to have bad qualities such as jealousy, so she is unprepared for his turn to violence. Their high expectations of each other are a major factor in the misunderstandings that lead to tragedy.

At the opposite extreme is Bianca. Cassio calls her a prostitute (4.1.119), but it is unclear whether that is her true occupation and relationship to Cassio or not. She is expected to simply be a sinful, unfaithful temptress, but she defies expectations as well. Bianca wishes for a more mutual relationship with Cassio. He demeans her both to others and to her face. Regarding Cassio's dismissiveness toward her in Act 3, scene 4, Kevin De Ornellas (2010) says, "[I]t was a reminder of the callous misogyny that animates so much of the play's destructive energy." Despite Cassio's cruel treatment of her, she cares for him, even rushing to his side when he is attacked while many men hold back (5.1.75). She defends herself, saying to the critical Emilia, "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you that thus abuse me" (5.1.122-23). When the people around her define her as a whore, it not only affects the way men view her but also pits other women against her. People judge Bianca by her reputation, not by her actual character. She defies expectations by showing immense care for Cassio. In Bianca, Shakespeare creates a character society would reject, but he makes her noble. The question of her occupation is meaningless and distracts from her role as a genuinely caring woman. Other characters, and even critics, ignore her complexity and role in the story.

When trying to define another person by one of two extremes, one erases everything that makes that person human. This happens especially often when men seek to define women; they dehumanize them and relegate them to their roles as daughters, wives, or mothers. Women are defined by their relationships to men and not expected to have their own internal lives. Othello recognizes that Desdemona has her own life but wishes that she did not: "O curse of marriage! / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!" (3.3.265-67) Othello wants Desdemona to be the perfect, chaste, "doll-like wife" (De Ornellas). Then, he is easily convinced of the opposite extreme: that she is a liar and a whore. Rather than seek to resolve problems with her by open communication, he wishes that she could simply be his passive possession. He wishes he did not have to treat Desdemona as an independent person whose will he must respect.

In the sixteenth century, shortly before *Othello* was written, common marriage customs came into question. As people began to more openly question or revolt against unjust political or religious rulers, they also began to question authority on smaller scales. The absolute rule of the husband was criticized as being inconsistent with a rejection of absolute political rule. The Puritan movement's doctrine of conscience allowed a subject or wife to disobey a ruler or husband on

grounds of conscience, especially in a religious sense. This helped give rise to the idea of the companionate marriage, “which unites ‘esteem’ and ‘desire’ in an amorous mutuality” (Deats 234). Marriages were forged based on romantic love more so than status or land, and they involved some element of respect between the spouses. The husband still had authority, but it was not as absolute as in the old, aristocratic, patriarchal idea of marriage.

Desdemona and Othello’s marriage begins as such a companionate marriage. They choose each other for love, and their pursuit of each other is mutual as demonstrated in their defense before the senate: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them” (1.3.167-68). Desdemona still references her “duty” (1.3.186) to her husband, but her duty is her choice. As the play progresses, Iago, whom De Ornellas describes as “misogynistic and crass,” leads them to switch to the more patriarchal view of marriage. He convinces Othello of the importance of obedience and justifies physical violence. Eventually, Othello begins striking her in public, as he thinks is his right. In response to Ludovico, he says,

“Ay! You did wish that I would make her turn.
Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on
And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;
And she’s obedient; as you say, obedient,
Very obedient.” (4.1.229-243)

Othello here mocks Ludovico’s claim of Desdemona’s obedience because he believes she has disobeyed him in a much more important way: being unfaithful. To him, her unfaithfulness is not just a betrayal of their love but a betrayal of his honor and role as the husband. Deats claims, “Othello perceives Desdemona’s alleged unfaithfulness as a defacement of his private property” (246). Desdemona is no longer a mutual wooer turned wife but rather a subject to Othello’s rule. Desdemona, seeking to protect herself, tries to fit herself into the latter role. She tries to be more obedient and more soft-spoken. In his account of one performance of the play, De Ornellas says, “Desdemona also lost dignity in the audience’s eyes because she seemed to sincerely believe that she had somehow deserved the assault.” Her attempts to fit into her role do not save her.

The Puritan doctrine of conscience challenged the idea of the wife as an extension of the husband, subject to him. Wives had to have their own agency if they were to question a tyrannical husband (Deats 237). In the beginnings of their marriage, Desdemona sees their identities as being tied together as partners. She says, “I saw Othello’s visage in my mind, / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (1.3.251-53). She sees her identity as lying with him by her own choice. The mutual nature of their relationship allows a kind

of co-identity: “Once they are married, Othello becomes for Desdemona not only her dearest friend but also an extension of her being; thus, she totally commits herself to her husband and submerges her identity in his” (Deats 244). Othello, however, does not view her as an independent person. He views her as an ideal wife and later as a disobedient subject: “If he cannot keep himself invulnerable by idealizing her, then he will do so by degrading her” (Garner). In his eyes, she becomes an object that he owns; her supposed disobedience is then grounds for punishment. She loses her identity and becomes merely a possession of her husband in the patriarchal marriage.

As Desdemona loses identity, Emilia gains it. While she often seems outspoken, her initial actions are typical of a submissive wife in an abusive relationship. De Ornellas characterizes her as “not an indulgent housewife but a virtually broken one, one ground into submission by a hectoring husband who would not stop hectoring until he got his way.” She steals Desdemona’s handkerchief for her husband without much questioning, inadvertently aiding Iago’s plot. In the end, however, she invokes the doctrine of conscience and speaks against Iago. As Deats says, “As Desdemona moves from articulateness to silence, Emilia progresses to brazen speech” (249). Her marriage begins where Othello and Desdemona’s marriage ends, with an abusive and judgmental husband. Desdemona, while still fighting against her fate, becomes more accepting of this style of marriage: “In direct contrast to Othello, who convicts his innocent wife, Desdemona exonerates her guilty husband” (Deats 247). Finally, Emilia convicts a guilty husband, demonstrating the clearest view of the situation and of morality out of anyone in the play.

Othello is part of a larger trend of domestic tragedies. Puritan homilies condemned abuse because that kind of violence would not be tolerated from a ruler. The wife was considered subject to her husband but still free in some ways, including being free from physical abuse. Despite this trend in marriages, many plays around Shakespeare’s time depict wives being murdered for infidelity. The message of these plays was not condemning violence but warning against unfaithfulness and disobedience to husbands. The murderous husband was often portrayed as being justified. Another group of early modern dramas was the Patient Griselda plays. These depicted innocent women who led abusive husbands to peace by their obedience, faithfulness, and patience (Deats 239). While these two groups of plays have different outcomes for the wives in them, the message is the same: obedience will be rewarded and disobedience punished. They demonstrate retribution theology. Good things come to the good, and bad things come to the bad. Obedience is the highest good for a woman.

Unique among domestic tragedies, *Othello* is about an innocent woman who is murdered by her husband. It is, as Ruth Vanita (1994) says, “the only play of its time which carries the chastity test to its logical conclusion by ending with the death

of the innocent heroine. Desdemona's chastity fails to save her life." *Othello* is realistic in showing that the husband is not always right, and the wife cannot always save herself. Shakespeare represents what was probably a common story of the time: wives abused by their husbands despite fulfilling all of society's expectations of them. Abusers do not need a reason to abuse, but some are excused by society based on their victim's actions. Vanita argues that Desdemona is not a patient Griselda figure as some critics suggest because Griselda plays "show patience as a strategy that works; in *Othello* it does not." Desdemona is one of the women that, while being somewhat more confident and sensual than may be expected of her, follows every societal rule about women's chastity. She is still murdered. *Othello* is a critique of the usual domestic tragedy, Griselda plays, and the retribution ideology surrounding them. It shows the realistic struggle of women experiencing domestic abuse and being held to unrealistic standards of subordination. The exposal of this issue on the stage indicated that abuse was not as accepted in seventeenth century society as one might expect, yet no widespread effort was made to punish abusers.

Characters in the play demonstrate the "hands-off" approach to domestic violence common both to the time of Shakespeare's writing and to modern times. Two women are killed in *Othello*; "In each case, the death blow is struck by one particular individual, but it is made possible by the collusion of a number of others who act on the assumption that husband-wife relations are governed by norms different from those that govern other human relations" (Vanita). The other characters refuse to intervene while Othello becomes increasingly violent to Desdemona. Iago, while having his own agenda, demonstrates a typical strategy to dealing with abuse when Desdemona asks for advice: "I pray you, be content: 'tis but his humour; / The business of the state does him offence, / And he does chide with you" (4.2.164-66). He offers excuses for Othello and recommends that Desdemona just wait and play the patient Griselda.

Then, there is Ludovico. He questions Othello's treatment of Desdemona, hears from Iago that Othello's violence is escalating, and does nothing. As Desdemona's cousin and a man with strong connections, he is in the best position of anyone in the play to help, yet he does not. In his last conversation with Desdemona, he is formal and distant. He decides to let the married couple work out their problems themselves. Thomas Rymer (1693) declares Ludovico an unrealistic character because of his nonintervention, but Ludovicos are common enough in the real world. Plenty of people notice domestic violence and decide it is not their responsibility to get involved. The play confronts the audience with the reality that this kind of violence still happens without them intervening; "The audience is guilty of failing to intervene in the daily drama of domestic violence that lies hidden behind countless bedroom doors in every society where *Othello* is staged" (Vanita). The failure of everyone around her to intervene condemns Desdemona to

death. The Ludovicos of this world are just as responsible for violence against women as the Othellos.

There is a desire to keep domestic violence private even when publicly performing it. The graphic depiction of Desdemona's murder even drove most nineteenth century productions of *Othello* to place the bed far off and cover it in veils while modern productions often dim the lights (Vanita). Violence against men is treated differently. Cassio's attack on Roderigo is immediately dealt with and punished. Later, the attempted murder of Cassio quickly draws attention, and Cassio is given medical treatment. Emilia, however, is killed in front of several armed men who do nothing to prevent her death. Rather, they prevent Othello from striking Iago, her killer. As the bodies of Desdemona and Emilia lay next to each other, the tragic image shows "how a great lady and ordinary gentlewoman are equally defenseless as wives, yet retain their dignity in death" (Vanita). Regardless of a woman's social status, she is still a second-class citizen under her husband's rule.

Over time, views on women and marriage have changed drastically. Women in many countries have gained independence through voting and property rights. They can survive on their own without resorting to begging or prostitution, unlike Desdemona. There is typically less asymmetry in marriage; modern marriages come from the movement towards conjugal marriage already evident at the time of *Othello*. Due to this progress, many modern audiences are uncomfortable with the play. De Ornellas critiques the portrayal of Desdemona as "stupid, punishment-accepting," and "foolish." She is seen as too submissive, not matching up with contemporary ideas of women. Emilia, on the other hand, "was the only major character in the production to merit consistent audience approval" (De Ornellas). Her outspokenness, honesty, and strong friendship to Desdemona earned her sympathy from the audience because those traits are much more valued in women now. De Ornellas also claims that the audience "barely lamented the murderous, stupid Othello," demonstrating the discomfort with toxic masculinity also present in his critique of Iago as "misogynistic and crass" and a "petty hater of women." Rymer's lack of sympathy for Othello, on the other hand, stems more from racism than feminism. He also dismisses Desdemona for marrying a black man, saying, "[Shakespeare] has chosen...a Venetian Lady to be the Fool" (Rymer). While both he and De Ornellas call Desdemona a "fool," De Ornellas is more motivated by Desdemona's accepting of her fate rather than her initially marrying for love.

In her speech about gender roles, Emilia says, "But I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall" (4.3.86-87). She means "fall" as in "fall to sin," but her statement proves accurate in the play when two women "fall" dead by their husbands' hands (Vanita). Tragedy is usually about the very public falls of men in power, who also drag women around them down with them. The domestic tragedy is much more private. *Othello* unites the public and the private and brings to light

an often-overshadowed issue. It puts violence against women in “center-stage,” challenging the placement of women at the mercy of their husbands and demonstrating the need for outsiders to intervene. *Othello* is a play of broken dichotomies: the public and the private tragedy, the patriarchal and the companionate marriage, the moral and the immoral woman. Just as the issue of domestic violence is complex, so are women.

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