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## Marital Power Plays

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Literary Explorations III

Mrs. Townsend

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### Marital Power Plays

William Shakespeare's *Othello* describes the deterioration of the jealous Moorish general Othello's marriage with Venetian noblewoman Desdemona. This domestic crisis, ignited by conniving manservant Iago's careful manipulations, hinges upon one handkerchief, its significance within Othello's and Desdemona's courtship, and its engineered discovery in the bedchambers of Michael Cassio. Just as this small handkerchief assumes an integral role, the actions of Emilia, Iago's wife, enable the fruition of his plots but ultimately result in his exposure and downfall; thus, *Othello* documents the decline of not one, but two marriages. The largest contrast between these two relationships is division of power, for while Desdemona assumes a very passive role, Emilia desires more independence and equality in her marriage. Despite her similarities with and sense of duty towards Iago, Emilia's strong personality makes her incompatible with her husband.

Emilia's position as Desdemona's handmaid is a servile role parallel to Iago's subordinate role to Othello. Although Emilia is ranked below her socially, Desdemona confides in and asks advice from her. As Othello probed Iago for details of his wife's reputed misdeeds, Desdemona sought comfort in Emilia from her husband's "jealous toy" (*Othello* 3.4.155). This ownership of Desdemona's trust places Emilia in the ideal position to collaborate with Iago, whose plans require manipulation of Othello and Desdemona by one who is trusted and close.

However, Iago's misogynist views lead him to treat Emilia as a subordinate rather than as his equal or partner. While chiding Emilia, he states that "It is a common thing—/... To have a foolish wife" (3.3.302-304). Iago's poor opinion of females extends not only to their intellect, but also their moral constitution, as he states that, in terms of adultery, "their best conscience/Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown" (3.3.203-204). Accordingly, Iago uses Emilia simply as a tool, keeping her ignorant of his motives. After "her wayward husband hath a hundred times/Wooed me to steal it," Emilia finally found Desdemona's discarded handkerchief and gave it to Iago (3.3.292-293). However, despite the handkerchief's central role in Iago's plans, "What he will do with it/Heaven knows, not I;/I nothing but to please his fantasy" (3.3.297-299). Iago's misogynistic principles would not allow him to share the details of his plans with Emilia.

Emilia's independent nature and desire for equality causes strife between her and Iago. After taking Desdemona's handkerchief, Emilia asked, "What will you do with't, that you have been so earnest/To have me filch it?" (3.3.314-315). After Iago refused to tell her, she became frustrated and demanded that he "Give't me again" (3.3.316). The resentment that the independent Emilia felt towards Iago also manifested in her interactions with her mistress. She is spurred by Othello's jealous probing into the loss of Desdemona's handkerchief to categorize men as "all but stomachs, and we all but food/.... when they are full/ They belch us" (3.4.103-105). Here, Emilia recognizes that Iago, among other men, exploits her when useful to his ends and then disregards her once she has outlived her usefulness to him. Her disillusionment after recognizing her mistreatment by Iago leads her to express cynicism towards all males, wishing for Desdemona that she "had never seen him [Othello]!" Emilia's bitterness over her subordination is a marked difference from the passive Desdemona (4.3.18).

Perhaps Iago should trust Emilia more, for Emilia possesses certain personality traits similar to his. Her desire for parity with Iago denotes ambition, which Iago exemplifies in his desire to become Othello's lieutenant (1.1.8). Emilia is also clever and not especially afraid of sin. While Desdemona swore "by this heavenly light" that she would never commit adultery, Emilia was willing and able to jest that "I might do't as well i' th' dark," far from being as scandalized as Desdemona (4.3.66-68). During the same discussion, she also admits pragmatically to be willing to "venture purgatory for't [adultery]" if the price were high enough (4.3.77).

In addition to having a similar personality to Iago, Emilia cares about him to a certain degree. After discovering that Iago was responsible for inciting Othello to Desdemona's death, she was initially stunned with disbelief, repeating "My husband?" several times before finally registering the import of Othello's words (5.2.150). Later, when confronting Iago, she begs him to "disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man" (5.2.173). While Emilia "thought so then" that Iago had some unsavory purpose for Desdemona's handkerchief (5.2.193), she believes "thou'rt not such a villain," at least until hearing Othello's testimony (5.2.152). Despite showing animosity and resentment towards Iago for most of the book, Emilia still wants to believe the best of Iago—within reason.

One of the biggest obstacles to Emilia's obedience to Iago, and a result of her independent nature, is her loyalty to Desdemona. While Emilia's connection with Desdemona may have originated out of her pre-existing bad relationship with Iago, the continuing camaraderie between the two women creates even more conflict between Emilia and Iago. The strength of Emilia's devotion to her mistress, with whom she served not only as a maidservant but also as a confidante, a comforter, and an advisor, is enough to eventually overrule any

allegiances she owed to Iago. Emilia had been reluctant to steal from Desdemona, so in order to both please Iago and justify the theft morally to herself, she waited until Desdemona “let it drop by negligence” (3.3.311). While her actions in this situation aid the goals of her husband, Emilia also hinders Iago’s plans by steadfastly vouching for Desdemona’s honesty. Unbeknownst to her, the “base notorious knave” and “scurvy fellow” towards whom she directs her outrage when learning about the basis for Othello’s jealousy is actually her husband (4.2.140).

After discovering Iago’s role in instigating the murder, Emilia betrays him out of love for the dead Desdemona. Despite urgings from Iago to go home and “charm your tongue,” Emilia feels “bound to speak” to Gratiano and Montano of the true circumstances of the handkerchief having been lost by Desdemona and found by Cassio (5.2.184-185). She acknowledges that “’Tis proper I obey him,” but that the situation called for honesty (5.2.196). In response to Iago’s repeated charges that she return home, Emilia finally turns her back upon her and states that “Perchance, Iago, I will ne’er go home” (5.2.197). The rift between the couple is crowned when, stabbed fatally by Iago for betraying him, Emilia’s dying wish is to be buried not by her husband, but “by my mistress’ side” (5.2.238).

While convincing Othello of Desdemona’s infidelity, Iago implies that “Not to affect many proposed matches/Of her own clime, complexion, and degree” is a sign of un-natural tendency in Desdemona’s nature and thus in the marriage (3.3.230). However, Emilia and Iago bear many similarities in both station and nature, and yet their union too ends in disharmony and tragedy. By showing this juxtaposition between Othello and Desdemona’s, and Emilia and Iago’s marriages, Shakespeare’s *Othello* can be interpreted not only as a commentary upon race, but also upon gender roles in Elizabethan society. Emilia, by the end of her development, is a strong, independent female character whose actions eventually win the respect and affection of the

audience, especially when she is paired with a misogynistic, manipulative antagonist such as Iago. In its support of a self-sufficient female figure, Shakespeare's portrayal of this couple's dynamics serves as a progressive look at the relationships between gender and power within the domestic setting.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice*. Ed. Russ McDonald. New York: Penguin Books, 2001. Print.