

# Othello: Women and 'Woman'

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It hath ever beene a common custome amongst Idle, and humerous Poets, Pamphleters, and Rimers, out of passionate discontentes, or having little otherwise to imploy themselves about, to write some bitter Satire-Pamphlet, or Rime against women: in which argument he who could devise anything more bitterly, or spitefully, against our sexe hath never wanted the liking, allowance and applause of giddy-headed people.<sup>1</sup>

Women in Shakespeare's England, as in the England of the Wife of Bath and Janekin, were among the easiest and commonest targets of satire. According to Louis B. Wright in his *Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, the increasingly active role of women during this period "aroused the ire of conservatives, who vented their displeasure in pulpit and pamphlet."<sup>2</sup> The mid-16th century publication of *The School-House of Women* (1542?)<sup>3</sup> renewed the arguments for and against women which continued throughout the rest of the century. In the early years of the next century, partly through the license given by King James's notorious dislike of women, anti-feminism gathered momentum, and these years produced such works as Barnabe Riche's *Faultes, Faultes, and Nothing Else but Faultes* (1606) and Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignement of Lewde, Idle, Forward and Unconstant Women* (1615) which brought public responses from outraged women. Throughout Shakespeare's lifetime, for all the glorification of Elizabeth, there was a living tradition of anti-feminism.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare takes this English tradition of satire against women and uses it dramatically and ironically: the old libels on women are voiced repeatedly by the speeches of the principal male characters while their falsity, inadequacy, and destructive nature are demonstrated amply by the actions of the women in the play. The anti-feminist invective of the play is weighed against the action of the play, in which all three women are almost entirely motivated by love and loyalty, and in which indeed their major function is to demonstrate various kinds of love and loyalty. Here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare makes use of current and facile generalizations about groups of people; he also compels us in various ways to question such generalizations and to recognise that any person's individuality and humanity signifies more than his or her membership of a group.

Iago is obviously the chief mouthpiece for such attitudes in *Othello* and especially for the attack on women. Although he is notoriously chameleon-like, adapting his attitudes and his bearing to his company and to his own complex motives—"I am not what I am," he says of himself, (I.i.65)<sup>4</sup>—the one constant feature in his various guises, whether he is with Cassio, Roderigo, or Desdemona, is his contempt for women. When he is with Desdemona and Emilia, he makes this contempt appear like the jovial banter of a rough soldier. Cassio, indeed, half-apologizes to Desdemona for him in just these terms: "You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar" (II.i.165). When alone with

his wife, Iago shows his contempt in dirty jokes and insults:

Emilia: I have a thing for you.

Iago: A thing for me? it is a common thing—

Emilia: Ha!

Iago: To have a foolish wife. (III.iii.301-04)

With Cassio, Iago is more circumspect—no doubt the “daily beauty” in Cassio’s life warns him off—but his description of Desdemona ignores her finer qualities and stresses her sexuality and availability; it is an implicit testing of Cassio’s attitude to Desdemona: “She is sport for Jove—And, I’ll warrant her, full of game ... What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley of provocation ... and when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?” With Roderigo, who notably lacks daily beauty in his life, Iago is more openly cynical. Desdemona is a “guinea hen,” a “supersubtle Venetian,” and Roderigo’s love for her is “merely a lust of the blood and the permission of the will” (I.iii.318, 364 & 339). With Othello, Iago plays on the comparative social ignorance of his General and calumniates Desdemona through a condemnation of Venetian women in general, thus making use of two traditions of prejudice:

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks  
They dare not let their husbands see. Their  
best conscience  
Is not to leave’t undone but keep’t unknown.  
(III.iii.202)

Whatever form this hostility takes, it is always present: one feature which Iago never quite discards or disguises in his contempt for women and indeed it is supremely useful to him.

His attack on women is inevitably the traditional attack; as Desdemona observes of his stric-

tures on women, “These are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh in th’alehouse” (II.i.140). Iago’s misogyny is such that he apparently feels that the highest possible feat of the best of possible women is merely trivially domestic: “to suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (II.i.159). Women, according to Iago, are idle, shrewish, ignorant, wilful, avaricious, vain and above all lecherous and adulterous—Iago accuses every one of the women of the play of faithlessness to the man she loves. Every one of these faults is a commonplace of the Elizabethan satirists’ case against women. Thomas Nashe for instance brings all his learning—or perhaps all his invention—to the cause:

The olde Sages did admonish young men, if ever they matcht wyth any wife, not to take a rich wife, because if she be rich, shee wyll not be content to be a wife, but will be a Master or Mistresse, in commaunding, chiding, correcting & controlling ... *Socrates* deemed it the desperatest enterprise that one can take in hand, to governe a womans will ... *Demosthenes* saide, that it was the greatest tormente, that a man could invent to his enemies vexation, to give him his daughter in marriage, as a domesticall Furie to disquiet him night and day. *Democritus* accounted a faire chaste woman a miracle of miracles, a degree of immortality, a crowne of tryumph because shee is so harde to be founde.<sup>5</sup>

The views ascribed to Democritus here remind one of Iago consoling Othello by referring to the normality, even universality, of female adultery. “Think every beared fellow that’s but yoked may draw with you” (IV.i.65-67). On the common Elizabethan theme of the vanity of women Nashe writes:

She had rather view her face a whole morning in a looking Glasse then worke by the

howre Glasse, shee is more sparing of her Spanish needle than her Spanish gloves, occupyes oftner her setting stick then sheeres, and joyes more in her Jewels then in her Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

The related sin of female pride—indeed when reading some satirists one might almost be tempted to say female sin of pride—is usually central in the satirists' version of the female character. For Iago, "she that was ever fair and never proud" (II.i.149) is a rare, perhaps nonexistent, woman. For Arthur Dent, writing in 1601, female pride was almost literally earth-shaking:

And truly wee may thinke the very stones on the streete, and the beames in the house do quake, & wonder at their monstrous, intollerable, and excessive pride: for it seemeth that they are altogether a lumpe of pride, a mass of pride, even altogether made of pride, and nothing else but pride, pride.<sup>7</sup>

Rodney Poisson has written interestingly of the "Italianate antifeminism" of Iago, in an article which establishes the relevance of Renaissance anti-feminism to this play.<sup>8</sup> There is no need to place the anti-feminism as particularly Italian: there is abundant anti-feminist material written in English, published in England in Shakespeare's lifetime. Iago's point of view would be familiar enough to the average member of Shakespeare's audience.

Shakespeare uses this ancient though still lively tradition to place Iago and his hatred and fear of women and sexuality. Indeed, Iago is presented as a character who is prepared to accept and to voice group hatred in general, and clichés about groups. Robert Heilman comments on Iago's use of plurals, generic singulars and abstractions to "subtly imply universal experience."<sup>9</sup> It is Iago too who uses the well-known contemporary national slurs: "Your Dane, your German, and your swag-bellied Hol-

lander ... are nothing to your English [as drinkers, that is]" (II.iii.79-80). It is he who condemns Venetian women with the traditional insult; it is he who stresses Othello's blackness and strangeness: Iago describes Othello as "an old black ram," a "Barbary horse" (I.i.88,112) and "an erring Barbarian" and as a typical member of his race: "These Moors are changeable in their wills (I.iii.355). Because of this vision of people as grouped and labelled, he can speak of Desdemona's love for Othello as being, because it is exogamous, a sexual perversion, as displaying a "will most rank" (III.iii.232). And Othello tragically comes to accept this generalized view of his marriage and the generalized view of Desdemona.

For as Iago gradually takes possession of Othello, Othello loses sight of the actual Desdemona, his wife whom he trusts and admires and of whose love he has ample evidence; he sees instead only the sexual generalization, the woman, the Venetian, the stranger. Though his own senses assure him of her truth: "If she be false, then Heaven mocks itself," he prefers rather to trust Iago's words. Indeed, this play is very much concerned with the power of words as opposed to the lesser power of evidence. Othello comes to see Desdemona as a "lewd minx" (II.iii.476), "public commoner" (IV.ii.73), "impudent strumpet" (IV.ii.81) and "that cunning whore of Venice" (IV.ii.89). Othello is, as Rodney Poisson points out, all the more easily convinced by Iago because Iago's accusations would sound all too familiar to him, as to any man or woman of the period. The pattern is ready waiting for any calumniated woman to be fitted into it, as Imogen was fitted into it, and even the unaccused Hermione. And Othello knew little of women and of the ordinary world of social intercourse:

Little of this great world can I speak  
More than pertains to feats of broil and  
battle

(I.iii.86-87)

This is why Iago chooses to ruin Othello in the way that he does, realizing that Othello depends on his ancient's superior knowledge of the Venetian world and of women. Othello says of Iago:

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,  
And knows all qualities, with a learned  
spirit  
Of human dealings

(III.iii.258-60)

*Othello*, then, is a play which voices clearly a bitter hostility towards women and towards sex. Women are whores or madams, sheep and mares. But while voicing this attitude, *Othello* also demonstrates clearly, though with hardly any direct comment, a contrasting view, so that there is an ironic counterpoint between words and action. The actual women of the play compel our admiration partly for their command of the very virtues which Iago and the satirists believe them to lack. Desdemona has indeed been criticized as being excessively saintly. When Cassio greets her:

Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,  
Before, behind thee, and on every hand  
Enwheel thee round

(II.i.85-87)

his words sound more like a description of her present state than a wish for her future state. Her chastity is so instinctive that she cannot imagine considering adultery. Her charity is almost beyond comprehension: despite her natural terror of death, she entirely forgives Othello to the point of lying with her last breath to shield him. She even forgives and prays for her unknown defamer, when Emilia guesses that such a person must exist: "If any such there be, Heaven pardon him" (IV.ii.135). Every speech in its very structure and diction shows her frankness and her simplicity: even her two lies reveal her nature, one in its childlike anxiety to avert the anger of an authority, the other in its final nobility.

Above all, Shakespeare stresses Desdemona's love for Othello. He presents her with superb economy so that she becomes a sort of embodiment of love in speech and action. She is prepared to court Othello, to defy her father for him, to go to war with him, to bear his blows and insults, and to lie with her last breath for his sake. Indeed, as Winifred Nowotny has shown, it is the very strength of the love for which she marries a stranger which leaves her particularly vulnerable to Iago's insinuations in the temptation scene.<sup>10</sup> For Othello too easily forgets that her bold actions are tokens of love, and in his lack of confidence in his own judgement of such matters, is made to think them rather signs of female depravity. He has been told that women are depraved: his knowledge that a woman can love is based merely on his own senses. Even by the end of the play, Othello has not fully grasped the completeness and depth of Desdemona's love, for if he had, he could never claim that he was "one that loved not wisely, but too well." The comparative poverty of his love would be too clear. His love is rich enough in its power to delight: even when he is convinced of her adultery, his sense of her graces and talents compel him to acknowledge "the pity of it" (IV.i.197); even as he is about to kill her, he is overcome with her beauty. His love is also strong enough in its power to shatter lives. Yet it is less than Desdemona's in that it lacks the power of forgiveness, and of perfect trust. As Philip Edwards says, "the fact that he can allow suspicion of Desdemona to enter his mind ... argues his love as simply not on her level."<sup>11</sup>

Desdemona in her lovingness and virtue is obviously remarkable and exceptional. As such, she cannot really be seen as necessarily counteracting the views of the anti-feminists, as most of the satirists after all would be prepared to concede some remarkable exceptions to their rule—perhaps the Virgin Mary, perhaps the Virgin Queen. But, of course, Desdemona is not the only female character of the play. And if her virtues seem rare and remote, then those of

Emilia and Bianca are much more readily imaginable and accessible—more human in that they are more flawed.

Emilia, indeed, voices the one explicit defence of woman in the play by stressing the common, flawed humanity of men and women, in much the same way that Shylock expresses the common needy humanity of Jews in *The Merchant of Venice*—Shakespeare's earlier Venetian play of justice and forgiveness:

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands,  
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, pas-  
sions? fed with the same food, hurt with the  
same weapons, subject to the same diseases,  
healed by the same means, warmed and  
cooled by the same winter and summer as a  
Christian is? If you prick us, do we not  
bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If  
you poison us, do we not die? and if you  
wrought us shall we not revenge?

(III.i.62-70)

In a similar vein, with similar rhetorical questions, and similarly to defend a hypothetical or proposed wrong action, Emilia points out the ordinary human fallibility of women:

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. What is it that they do  
When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?  
I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?  
It is so too. And have not we affections,  
Desires for sport, and frailty as men have?

(IV.iii.94-102)

As E.A.M. Colman points out, "Emilia's apology, even by its very pace and tone, establishes

for *Othello* as a whole, the feeling that reasonableness still exists, that despite all the perversion and furies an ordinary recognisable world will somehow prevail."<sup>12</sup> Like her husband, Emilia is well aware of human weaknesses; but whereas he responds to such weakness with a kind of gloating contempt, her reaction is more humane and charitable. Emilia, in her basic humanity, has a most useful function in the play in that she provides a kind of release for the audience by voicing its ordinary spontaneous "low" reactions to the speech and actions of the major characters. For instance, after Desdemona's breath-taking prayer for her hypothetical accuser "Heav'n pardon him," Emilia retorts "A halter pardon him and hell gnaw his bones," (IV.ii.136), and in the final scene, she relieves the audience greatly by actually naming Othello a fool. She is not too scrupulous to pilfer the handkerchief, not too pure to use the word "whore" or to consider a suitably rewarded adultery; yet it should be noted that in these faults she is in a twisted way considering her husband's welfare. However, finally she rises above the moral level at which her marriage has established her: "Tis proper I obey him, but not now" (V.ii.195). In extremes, her instinct is for truth and for faithfulness to the best that she knows, which is Desdemona. She tells her husband in outraged love and truth:

You told a lie; an odious, damned lie;  
Upon my soul, a lie, a wicked lie...  
(V.ii.180-82)

I will speak liberal as the north.  
Let heaven and men and devils, let them  
all,  
All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.  
(V.ii.220-22)

She shows an unquestioning courage in the face of the swords of both Iago and Othello:

Thou hast not half the power to do me  
harm

As I have to be hurt.

(V.ii.257-61)

Like Desdemona, she dies at the hands of her husband; like Desdemona, she dies full of love, vindicating the person she loves best:

Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan

And die in music. [singing] Willow, willow, willow.

Moor, she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor;

So come my soul to bliss as I speak true;  
So speaking as I think, I die, I die.

(V.ii.257-61)

Ultimately, her motive and her values are the same as Desdemona's: Emilia's essential role as the revealer of the truth in this last scene of the play is an expression of love.

Indeed, this is true of all the women in the play. The third of these, Bianca, is of course foolish, inarticulate and ridiculous, but again what is significant and remarkable about her is her love for Cassio, a love which, like Desdemona's for Othello and Emilia's for Desdemona, is uncommon, in excess of what is normally expected: "I never knew a women love man so" (IV.i.111). Shakespeare rapidly establishes through her speech habits two significant elements of Bianca's love, its absurdity and its jealous tendency. Her absurdity is established through her use of the standard lover's hyperbole, appropriate enough in the lips of a Juliet but not on those of a whore:

What, keep a week away? Seven days and nights?

Eight score eight hours? And lovers' absent hours

More tedious than the dial eight score times  
O weary reck'ning.

(III.iv.172-75)

Her jealousy appears through vigorous, vulgar (and totally realistic) scolding:

This is some minx's token and I must take out the work? There! [*She throws down the handkerchief*].

Give it to your hobbyhorse.

(IV.i.151-55)

Both the jealousy and the absurdity are significant because Othello must see Cassio laugh at Bianca and think he is laughing at Desdemona, and because he must also see Bianca throw down the handkerchief. These actions, which spring from her excessive passion, provide Bianca with a dramatic function. Her inordinate love gives her a role in the play, in the same way as Emilia's love gives her the role of revealer of the truth in the last scene, and Desdemona's love provides a basic tenet of the whole plot. And although like Othello Bianca is jealous, her love is not like his—ultimately destructive, but protective. Her love gives her courage, as it gave courage to Desdemona and Emilia; it gives her the courage to stay with the wounded Cassio, the courage to avow her actions to Iago, and to defy his condemnation of her.

Thus all the women in the play are lovers, are faithful and courageous. In contrast with most of the men of the play, with Roderigo, Cassio and of course, above all Othello, they are uncorrupted, unmoved from their avowed standards and acknowledged alliances. Under pressure from Iago's mastery of words and skill in manipulating established prejudices, Roderigo abandons his hazy sense of Desdemona's virtue and the special nature of his love for her, Cassio his abstinence, and Othello his trust in Desdemona; but Bianca, Emilia and Desdemona stay firm.

The intensity of this play, which is reinforced by its speed, the singleness of its plot, and its small cast, is made yet stronger by its constant

references to heaven and hell, to the ultimate destination of the soul.<sup>13</sup> All the main characters refer, however thoughtlessly, to redemption and damnation: the bitterest part of Othello's final sufferings is his sense of his eternal severance from Desdemona.

When we shall meet at compt,  
This look of thine will hurl my soul from  
heaven  
And fiends will snatch at it.

(V.ii.276)

This stress on eternal justice has an ironic relation with Othello's insistence on temporal justice, for this is in clear contrast to Desdemona's instinctive forgiveness. Whatever Shakespeare's beliefs were, and this is not at issue here, this play obviously uses in its "evaluation of justice in its relation to love"<sup>14</sup> the Pauline contrast between the new covenant and the old, between grace and law, forgiveness and justice. It is, in this context, the women of the play who embody Christian values. They are motivated by love, not by justice, that is by the new covenant and not the old. Desdemona's love for Othello is larger than his for her because it includes *agape* as well as *eros*. Furthermore, their behaviour is Christian in that they are not transmitters of the pain they receive, as Iago is when he turns his large and general sense of being wronged into a brilliant campaign of destruction, or as Othello is when his agony of jealousy drives him to murder. Desdemona, in forgiving any wrong which has been done her, attempts to prevent that wrong from passing on, while Emilia, more effectively, finally insists on full publicity for the truth and thus prevents her husband's lies from doing any further damage.<sup>15</sup>

The issue between Iago and Emilia is honesty and dishonesty, as the issue between Othello and Desdemona is love and justice. Indeed, the complex interaction between the two marriages is illuminating. In this play, we see Iago deliberately lead Othello away from his trust in Des-

demona, his wife, into corruption and folly. Desdemona, quite unconsciously, causes Emilia to be led from her trust in Iago, her husband, and thus from corruption and folly. Desdemona weighs against Iago not only with Othello but with Emilia. Man gravitates towards man destructively, woman towards woman redemptively. Emilia has an Othello-like role again in Act Five where, as Othello had before, she must face an accusation against her spouse. But in Othello's position, Emilia is direct, immediate: immediately and publicly she faces her husband with the charge against him and insists on verification. Othello had indeed also asked for verification:

Villain be sure thou prove my love a  
whore!  
Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof;  
Or by the worth of my eternal soul,  
Thou hadst been better have been born a  
dog  
Than answer my waked wrath.

(III.iii.359-63)

But this demand is satisfied more by its own dramatic force than by a proper answer and is in any case addressed to the wrong person. Othello is diverted by the extremity of his own emotion, and by the vehement expression of it, and yet it is sincere emotion. Emilia is not without feelings: indeed she's almost dumbstruck: "my husband" she repeats incredulously; yet unlike Othello, she does not allow the strength of her feelings to divert her from action and the quest for truth.

Of course, part of the tragedy springs from the inadequacy of the women of the play, from Bianca's amorousness, Emilia's willingness to pilfer and above all Desdemona's reluctance to oppose and question Othello. Yet on the whole, the women of the play are dramatic contradictions of Iago's generalized and distorted view of human nature because they are concerned with love, and because, as John Bayley says in his

discussion of Othello, “the capacity to love — though it contains the desire of possession—is quite separate from the urge to dominate by knowing and placing,”<sup>16</sup> as Iago does.

The wide currency in Shakespeare’s England of the traditional prejudice against women which Iago voices is demonstrated by the host of pamphlets with such titles as: *The Proud Wyves Pater Noster*; *The deceyte of women, to the instruction and example of all men, yonge and olde*; *A glass to view the Pride of Vainglorious women*; *My Ladies Looking Glasse*; *The Slightes of Wanton Maids* and so on. This tradition clearly enables the jealous husbands of faithful wives in Shakespeare’s later plays, Othello, Posthumus, and Leontes, to turn circumstantial evidence into an instant conviction of guilt and a hatred of woman—“there’s no motion/That tends to vice in man, but I affirm/’t is the woman’s part” (*Cymbeline* II.v.20-22). In *Othello*, such prejudice is used to place evil: Iago is placed partly by his use of such destructive and demonstrably false generalizations and cynical stock attitudes. And these attitudes in turn are implicitly and strongly placed by the very fact that they are the stock-in-trade of such a man as Iago.

#### NOTES

1. Esther Sowernam (pseud.) *Ester hath Hang’d Haman ...* 1617 pp. 31-2, quoted by Juliet Dusinberre in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London: Macmillan, 1975) p. 180.
2. Louis B. Wright, *Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1935), p. 466.
3. *The School-House of Women* was probably written by Edward Gosynhill: the date of its first edition is probably 1542, though the earliest copy extant is dated (doubtfully) 1550 by the *Short Title Catalogue*. See Wright, p. 468.
4. All references to Shakespeare’s works are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* ed. Hardin Craig (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1961).
5. *The Anatomie of Absurditie* (1588) in *Works* ed. Rortald B. McKerrow, Rev. F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) I, 12-13.
6. Nashe, 18.
7. *The Plaine Mans Path-way to Heaven* (1601) quoted by Wright, p. 479.
8. “The ‘Calumniator Credited’ and the Code of Honour in Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” *English Studies in Canada* II (1976), 381-401.
9. *Magic in the Web: Action & Language in Othello* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1956), pp. 196-97.
10. “Justice and Love in *Othello*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 21 (1951), 330-344.
11. *Shakespeare and the Confines of Art* (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 126.
12. *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare* (London: Longman’s, 1974), p. 126.
13. See *Magic in the Web*, p. 251 for a descriptive catalogue.
14. Nowottny, 330.
15. Both the behaviour of these two women and its varying effectiveness is in keeping with their roles in the stories of detraction discussed by Joyce C. Sexton in *The Slandered Woman in Shakespeare* (Victoria, B.C.: ELS Monograph Series 12, 1978). She speaks of “the traditional sense that the victim of detraction is helpless” and goes on to discuss “the absolute necessity that the unjustly accused woman regain her good fame, that the truth be widely publicized” (p. 45). Such publicity for the truth is Emilia’s achievement.
16. John Bayley, *The Characters of Love* (New York: Basic Books, 1961), p. 205.