

Othello – focus on
desdemona and
emilia's contrasting
views of marriage



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At the start of this scene the stage is crowded with ‘gentlemen of Venice’, Emilia, Desdemona and Othello and just before the characters file out to leave the solitary two women; we catch a brief, cold exchange between Desdemona and Othello.

Othello’s blunt authoritative tone and words are chilling, but the audience feels the impact of Desdemona’s empty, hurt and ever submissive “my lord?” “... “I will, my lord” much more strongly. These feeble utterances help to convey Desdemona’s view of marriage and the overall situation. Her husband has just publicly stuck her, humiliating her in front of her own kinsmen in addition to calling her a plethora of degrading terms and yet she does not complain she shows no signs of bitterness, just blind obedience.

After the other characters exit, Desdemona and Emilia are left alone on the stage, visually, the vast space would appear to daunt the two women in its centre. This has the effect of showing them as isolated and may represent the isolation they feel within their respective marriages. It also gives the characters a platform on which to speak uninterrupted, where they are free from keeping up pretences they may maintain in front of the other characters, especially their husbands. Whilst Emilia appears to use this opportunity, unrepressed by Iago, to openly share her true thoughts on marriage and love, Desdemona acts very much as if Othello were present. Some interpret this as a display of Desdemona’s purity, it is not that she does not feel comfortable in sharing with Emilia her true thoughts, but that she has no “unclean” thoughts in her to share, she truly believes that marriage is as perfect a bliss as she proclaims.

Desdemona’s views of marriage certainly jar with those of a modern audience. Years after the play was written, after the suffragettes, equal pay and Britain’s first female prime minister; the idea of a husband “command[ing]” any woman to “go to bed” is preposterous enough, but that the woman should placidly obey infuriates modern day audiences of both sexes alike. Desdemona is determined to carry out her husband’s bidding, even when it conflicts with her own interests. Although she is in a state where one feels she must be in want of company, she dismisses Emilia and persists in doing so throughout the scene (“give me my nightly wearing and adieu.”).

.. “prithie dispatch”)defending her actions by reminding herself of her duties, after all she “must not now displease him”. Again these remarks give an insight into her beliefs on marriage, which read like those of a perfect ‘dutiful’ Elizabethan wife.

Her unwavering determination to submit to her husband’s wishes would be applauded by the Elizabethan audience in almost any other situation; it was after all decorum for a wife to act in such a way, and indeed it may have been even in this situation. However even a society in which wives were expected to submit to their husbands most fanciful of wishes, the notion of a wife carrying out an order which will eventually facilitate her own death may have seemed a little unnerving. Desdemona appears almost childlike in her innocent devotion to her marriage and her love and declares that despite everything Othello has done, her “love doth so approve him that even his... frowns.

.. have grace and faith in them. ” One interpretation of this is that Desdemona is putting on an act, fooling herself into being the most perfect wife possible as a defence mechanism against Othello’s chiding.

Desdemona is attempting to win back Othello’s affection, not by questioning him or defending herself but by becoming a caricature of herself, more loving, more innocent, and more devoted to try and recapture whatever she has lost and make him fall for her once again. However, this is a modern interpretation which is perhaps too cynical and pivots on the utter disbelief that a woman, who has just been physically hurt by her husband, could stand on stage and assure her audience that she loves him so much that she loves his anger too. The frustration a modern audience feels is heightened even farther when Desdemona discloses a foreboding suspicion of her impending death, asking of Emilia that should she die first, Emilia would “ shroud her” in her wedding sheets. Desdemona’s suspicions are then cemented in her singing of the “ willow song”.

However, before examining this, it is important to understand also Emilia’s perceptions of marriage. Emilia presents views in this scene which, whilst not quite being up to the standards of a twenty first century feminist, would certainly have been revolutionary at the time. She does not blindly obey Othello, though he is a man and also her superior in social rank, instead questioning his “ command[s]”, she queries not only Othello’s command itself, but also Desdemona’s compliance in the carrying out of said command, whilst also appearing to question Othello’s motives, all by her simple utterance of, “ dismiss me? ” Emilia does not gloss over the ever clearer cracks appearing in Desdemona and Othello’s marriage as <https://assignbuster.com/othello-focus-on-desdemona-and-emilias-contrasting-views-of-marriage/>

Desdemona chooses to; she refuses to see any marriage as flawless merely because it is a marriage, perhaps this is related to her own erroneous union with Iago. Emilia declares that Desdemona would be in a better situation without Othello, in fact she “ would [Desdemona] never [even] saw him”, directly contradicting the views of the time, where a woman was seen as worthless without a husband. This view also clashes of course with Desdemona’s blunt refusal to see anything bad in Othello, who retorts “ so would not I” reminding us of her earlier proclamation that “ I nothing but to please his fancy”. The stark contrast between the two women’s comprehension of marriage is also visible in their brief discussion of Lodovico.

Desdemona’s flattery of Lodovico is strictly noble in its terms, she calls him “ a proper man”; perhaps reflecting a subconscious wish that she had married a Venetian over Othello, although in light of her earlier declarations of unfettered love this is unlikely; and then when Emilia calls him “ very handsome”, Desdemona refers to him again very civilly, noting that “ he speaks well”. It is important to note the differences in the manner in which the two women speak of Lodovico, Desdemona is very careful of her word choice and this shows her worries that even if she mentally praised another man in a romantic or admiring way she would be betraying Othello, and being as pure and innocent as she inherently is, she could never do that. Emilia however is much more relaxed in her praise, not only is he “ very handsome” but Emilia knows of a “ lady in Venice would have walked bare foot to Palestine” just to kiss him. This shows that Emilia is less bound by self-inflicted morals and for her, the bonds and duties of marriage are wound less

tightly, she is not scared to compliment other men. One of the most poignant aspects of the scene is Desdemona's halcyon, mournful "willow song".

A wistful "old thing" of a woman betrayed by her love, and whose heartbreak is such that her tears "fell from her and softened the stones". The song itself, written in rhyming verse, is beautiful and brimming with natural language with continuous references to "willow", "streams", "stones" and the "garland"; it flows like the "streams... That] murmured her moans".

The song is one of the most important tools Shakespeare provides to help unlock the psyche of Desdemona and her feelings on marriage and her own situation in general. She sings the "willow song" because it "will not go from [her] mind" and this is because of the remarkable similarities in the two women's situations. Like Barbary, Desdemona is totally resigned to her fate. Too full of sorrow to fight, so overwhelmed by her bewilderment in what is happening to her love that she subconsciously intertwines her own words into the song, "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve". The song reflects her utter compliance to the role of dutiful and submissive wife; by making the audience fully aware that Desdemona predicts her own demise and yet does not act upon this suspicion merely accepts it. Desdemona is submissive to the point she appears to think it treacherous to forge her own fate and will instead, quite literally as we find out later, lie down and take the destiny her husband inflicts upon her.

However, when deconstructing this scene and acknowledging the significance of the willow song, it is vital to remember that when Othello was

first printed, in the Quarto, the willow song did not exist; it was added as it appears to have been an afterthought by Shakespeare in the Folio edition of his plays, the year after. Because the song so entrenches the view of Desdemona as a subservient wife, we can only imagine that maybe Shakespeare wasn't satisfied by the first performances of Desdemona, perhaps she was not passive enough and so added the willow song to make her a more sympathetic and more compliant character. Iago, earlier in the play taunts Othello that Venetian women do not regard adultery as seriously as Othello does, but this scene exposes how defective his statement truly is.

A. C.

Bradley describes Desdemona as a “child of nature” who has a “deep and inward division” which creates her monochrome views of morals, her ingrained sense of right and wrong. It is due to this ingrained sense of right and wrong that she wholly rejects any notion that a woman might “abuse their husband in such great kind” as cuckolding them. It is a tribute to Desdemona's virtue and innocence that she finds the concept of adultery so abhorrent that she would not “do such a deed for all the world” but it also shows Desdemona's immaturity in insisting that her marriage and keeping her marriage pure is sacrosanct, above anything else, including everything in the whole world. Emilia's replies are at first playful, when Desdemona states she would not commit adultery “by this heavenly light” Emilia quips “nor I neither by this heavenly light. I might do't as well I'th'dark”, but as Desdemona continues to refuse the possibility that adultery could be excusable, Emilia grows more sincere. Emilia's attempt to remind Desdemona that if one had the whole world, no wrongs would be wrongs, not

even adultery, is in vain; Desdemona remains stubborn, yet the audience grasp a glimpse of Emilia’s true thoughts, clearly she is both less melodramatic than Desdemona and can put things in perspective, and also she is much less deluded in her view of marriage, she can see it is not always perfect.

The most important or at least the most revolutionary passage on marriage, women’s rights and possibly even love within the entire play is Emilia’s within this scene. It is instantly obvious that the speech is important because Emilia speaks in verse, not prose, immediately placing her on a par with the men of the play and the fact she is not interrupted throughout the speech means it is almost like a soliloquy, again elevating the speech in significance. Emilia depicts marriage as an unbalanced affair, where the fault lies with the husbands “if wives do fall”. She warns that if husbands “slack their duties” they should not expect their wives to comply and allow it to happen, because women too have “galls” and can be bitter and even though they may appear graceful, women too have taste for revenge.

Emilia goes on to highlight how unfair the maltreatment of women by their husbands is, by reminding the audience (and Desdemona) that women are just the same as men, they are equal, they have the same senses, emotions and desires as men do, forcing the audience to question what the difference between the two sexes actually is, and whether it is truly significant enough a difference to allow one sex to be so abused by the other. The speech is reminiscent of Shylock’s famous “I am a Jew” speech and shows not the differences between people but the similarities, that we are all inherently human and the same. Emilia feels so strongly on this because of her own <https://assignbuster.com/othello-focus-on-desdemona-and-emilias-contrasting-views-of-marriage/>

uneven relationship with Iago, whom the audience is certain does not treat her with the respect she deserves, and may have committed the sins against Emilia that Emilia lists, (adultery, peevish jealousies etc). Emilia’s speech would have been truly ground breaking in an Elizabethan theatre, and its words still resonate with feminists today. The speech shows above all else in this scene the conflicting views of the two leading women in the play, and after the speech Desdemona quietly adds “ God me such uses send, not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend” indicating she has not listened to a word Emilia said.