

Othello

Literature, Russian Literature



In the play 'Othello', Shakespeare portrays the character of Emilia as both an older and more cynical counterpart to Desdemona, with whom she develops a close and maternal relationship. Despite her seemingly moral and grounded character, Emilia's one misguided and dishonest act towards her lady, in favour of her husband's evil bidding, turns out to have devastating consequences and ultimately leads to the tragic demise of both Desdemona and herself.

Although certainly guilty of stealing the handkerchief which provides Othello's 'ocular proof' I believe that she is not entirely guilty for her naive and misguided actions or for the deaths that occur as a result. When Emilia arrives in Cyprus with Desdemona, Shakespeare makes it clear that she does not share a loving relationship with Iago. After Cassio has extended his welcome by kissing Emilia, Iago cruelly observes that if 'she give you so much of her lips as of her tongue she oft bestows on me you'd have enough', which shows his disrespect towards Emilia.

This is confirmed by the way he continues to express his dislike for women in general as he accuses them of being 'players in [their] housewifery', and 'housewives in [their] beds'. This conversation is important to understand Emilia's motives later on in the play, as it is clear that there is no love in her marriage to Iago, which may be why she steals the handkerchief - to earn his approval and attention. Harry Berger believes that Emilia's behaviour straddles 'two trajectories, one dominated by Desdemona and the other by Iago. In the first she is a faithful attendant, in the second a close-mouthed watcher'.

Shakespeare portrays her as a good woman who is maternally close to Desdemona, which is why we find it hard to understand why she steals the handkerchief. Berger also highlights that 'the handkerchief itself is, as Emilia says, only a 'trifle' when she takes it' and therefore she only sees it as an instrument to please her husband and not something important. It is questionable whether Emilia knows her husband's true motives, as during a conversation between Desdemona, Cassio and herself she seems deeply concerned that Cassio's demotion 'grieves [her] husband as if the cause were his'.

Shakespeare's choice of the verb 'grieves' specifically suggests that she believes she has seen a sadness in him caused by love and concern for his friend, which may have convinced her that there is a sentimental side somewhere within him. This is further evidence that he is capable of putting on a good act around the people closest to him, and alerts the audience to the fact that Iago is more than capable of lying convincingly to his wife as well as to the other characters.

When Emilia steals Desdemona's 'token', she is not aware of acting as Iago's accomplice; instead she simply sees it as an opportunity to impress him and knows it is something that he would value because he 'hath a hundred times wooed' her to steal it. However because she acknowledges to the audience that her husband is 'wayward', this suggests that she does know that Iago has an element of mischief in him, and that he may not use the token for moral purposes, but decides to ignore her instincts because she loves him and wants to 'please his fantasy'.

Indeed she even admits that ' Heaven knows, not I ' ' what he will do with it', which implies that she doesn't want to know, perhaps because she knows no good will come of it or, perhaps, because she doesn't care as long as she receives attention from him. The only guilt that Emilia shows here is of being unwaveringly devoted to Iago over Desdemona despite her clear disapproval for his manners. Sadly, Emilia's attempt to make the presentation of the handkerchief to Iago a teasing, flirtatious interaction fails miserably.

The use of the address ' you' is another implication that their relationship is not one of two people who share a bed but rather of two people conversing formally. After being insulted for having ' a thing' for him which he cruelly describes as ' common' she reveals that she has stolen the same handkerchief for him ' which so often' he asked her to steal. Because Iago snatches it, Emilia suspects her husband has bad intentions for its use and asks for Iago to ' give't me again' as if she has remembered what he is capable of.

Before, she justified stealing Desdemona's handkerchief as just a ' filch' which would mend her marriage, but now it seems she has realised the implications of her action: that it was not worth it and she senses that her crime may have consequences. I think that when Emilia was contemplating taking the handkerchief that Desdemona had let ' drop by negligence' she was acting as Iago's passive accomplice as she was fully aware that it would fulfil his fantasy and please him, but when Iago refuses to tell her what he will do with it she panics.

As Harry Berger mentions, Emilia ‘anticipates trouble’, and hesitates to give Iago the handkerchief, ‘but blinkers herself and throws in her lot with Iago’. Emilia has the chance to speak up when she is a witness to Othello hectoring Desdemona about the handkerchief, but she does not, and instead goes on to criticise men and their treatment of women in general. When Othello interrogates Emilia about Desdemona's supposed affair with the sycophant Cassio, she insists that she is innocent ‘honest, chaste and true’.

She also uses the word ‘Never’ repeatedly to emphasise her surety that she ‘saw no harm’ ‘nor ever did suspect’ that her mistress was ever unfaithful. This is the second time she fails to report something she has seen or heard, though here, as before, she is well positioned to know that her failure can increase Desdemona's jeopardy along with Othello's jealousy. Clearly Emilia is a woman of some intelligence as she's the only woman in the play to realise that Othello has been manipulated by ‘some eternal villain’ and even suggests that the motive was ‘to get some office’, but she never suspects her own husband.

Berger also notes that ‘Her failure to put two and two together and recognise that the scoundrel she describes is Iago is strictly part of the negotiation between the play and its audience, a venerable mechanism for driving spectators wild by conspicuously blocking and deferring anagnorisis until too late’. If she was as close to Desdemona as Shakespeare portrays her to be and if she saw this was causing problems between them, then she should confess, or perhaps she is silent because she would never suspect

Iago to be purposely deceitful no matter how 'wayward' he is and decided to remain silent.

Her innocence of not suspecting Iago confirms her devotion to him as she would clearly never believe him capable of perpetrating evil.) When she finds Desdemona strangled in her bed she seems genuinely shocked that Iago has caused this as she repeats 'my husband!' three times and despite evidence provided by Othello, she still refuses to believe that her husband is capable of such villainy as she declares 'thou'rt not such a villain'. When the depth of his deception becomes clear she is quick to condemn him 'may his precious soul/Rot half a grain a day'.

She repetitively uses the word 'villainy' to show how she now perceives her husband - as the devil. Although she may have been happy to commit a small crime such as stealing a trifle, she cannot condone atrocious villainies, even when committed to the husband to whom she should owe the greatest loyalty. Emilia bravely sacrifices her own life in order to clear Desdemona's name and it seems that Iago accounted for everything except the loyalty of his wife. It is true that she has been committed to Iago throughout the play, but when she realises the extent of his treachery she stands up for the truth instead.

Emilia's only hamartia is that she is guilty of loving people too much and that she tried to fulfil two very contradictory roles. She loved Iago more than he deserved which resulted in Desdemona's murder, and because she loved Desdemona like a daughter it resulted in her own demise. While Emilia is surely culpable for her part in the plot, and as an audience we find it hard to

understand some of the choices she makes, her utter surprise at what Iago has done in Act V in many ways exonerates her.

Her love for Desdemona is genuine, but unfortunately Emilia fails to understand the depths of her husband's villainy before it is too late. I believe it is important to acknowledge that their downfall was partly due to Othello's jealousy, Iago's malice and Cassio's mistreatment of women, however, Emilia's role in this tragedy cannot be ignored and so to put her blame into perspective she is only guilty for desiring to be loved, and only in part for the tragic downfall of Othello and Desdemona because of her naivety and misguided actions.