

# Othello has been called a 'domestic tragedy'

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A domestic tragedy takes place in a personal setting. In Othello, the men are in Cyprus to fight a war. However, the tragedy is the events within the relationships of the central characters. There is little discussion of the war and, although Desdemona blames state matters for Othello's change in behaviour, the real problems Othello faces are matters of the heart. The women in the play have no part in the war, but still their presence contributes to the downfall of both Othello and Iago, creating repercussions for the state.

The historical context of the play is important when considering the female characters contained in it. The play was first performed in 1604 at the start of the reign of King James I. It is generally thought that wives were expected to be obedient to their husbands at this time, and play the "maiden never bold", as Desdemona is described by her father in Act One, scene three. However, the time of the play's first performance was shortly after the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth never married and is known to have been of strong character. It is therefore likely that a strong-willed female character would have been accepted by an audience of this time.

A feature of the play that should be considered is the misogyny shown by the male characters. In the first scene of the play, the language used by Iago to describe the sexual acts of Desdemona and Othello is coarse,

" an old black ram

Is tupping your white ewe".

The sexuality of women is valued little by the men in the play, except for Othello who seems to over-romanticise it. Iago is coarse and rude. Cassio is seen as a ladies man, but uses women for sex. Roderigo shows very little knowledge of Desdemona but loves her for her beauty. Othello is similar to this, he idealises Desdemona, showing little understanding of her as a person. As Leavis says, Othello has a "preoccupation with his emotions rather than with Desdemona in her own right." The three men, Othello, Iago and Cassio, all have a typically male profession, that of a soldier. They are all, including Othello (despite his romanticism), very masculine characters. Othello's lack of understanding and failure to attempt to understand, the complexity of women contributes greatly to his downfall.

The character of Desdemona is a complex one. She has strong beliefs and shows complete devotion to Othello. Her main belief is in true love, and her views on this never falter. She will do anything to maintain her love with Othello. Her first appearance in the play shows bravery, a true love of Othello and complete trust in him. It is here she first expresses her views on love.

"to his honours and valiant parts

Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate."

Desdemona believes that to love someone is to give oneself to them completely. She has a very idealistic view on love and this is shown again in Act Four, scene three when she is discussing unfaithful women with Emilia.

"Dost thou in conscience think - tell me, Emilia -

That there be women do abuse their husbands

In such gross kind?"

It is her innocent and naïve views that show what Desdemona represents in the play. In 'The Othello Music', Knight says " In Othello, pure love is the supreme good". Desdemona's main belief is in pure love. This leads to the conclusion that Desdemona represents goodness and purity within the play, as when she is dead, Knight says " pure love lies slain."

Another value Desdemona possesses is compassion. When Cassio loses his status as Othello's Lieutenant, it is Desdemona that he goes to for help, under the instruction of Iago. Even though Iago is doing this to benefit himself, what he says to Cassio of Desdemona is entirely true.

" She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, that she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested."

As Knight states in 'The Othello Music', Desdemona " is typically feminine in her attempt to help Cassio, and her pity for him." Othello also tells the Senate in Act One, scene three that he loved Desdemona " that she did pity" him for the dangers he had passed. It is femininity that Desdemona also represents in the play. She is loved and admired for her girlish innocence and feminine compassion.

Emilia represents a more down-to-earth, common sense woman.

Her personality, like Desdemona's is feminine in many ways. For example, she is highly protective over Desdemona, acting as a mother figure to her.

The femininity she represents is more mature than Desdemona's. As she is older than Desdemona, and has been married to Iago for a longer time than Desdemona to Othello, she is far more knowledgeable about love and life. She is also more cynical and far less romantic in her views. In her conversation with Desdemona about unfaithful women, she openly admits that she would be unfaithful to her husband if the whole world were her reward.

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" who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?"

Emilia knows that love and men are not as ideal as Desdemona believes them to be. When Othello's behaviour towards Desdemona changes, Emilia, unlike Desdemona realises that something is wrong with the relationship and that Desdemona should not let Othello treat her in such a way.

" I would you had never seen him."

She stands for strength and common sense, and her views about marriage show this clearly.

" Let husbands know

Their wives have sense like them".

Bianca represents a quite impure love within Othello. She shows that she loves Cassio, but her lifestyle as a prostitute also shows this as quite corrupt. She represents the opposite of the innocent and naïve Desdemona. She is

a woman with no responsibility to anyone but herself in the play. She has a relationship with Cassio but her reputation does not allow this to be taken seriously by anyone, including Cassio himself. She represents a love with few morals. Desdemona believes in completely faithful, perfect love, Emilia believes that being unfaithful is acceptable for a large price and Bianca, although she seems to care greatly about Cassio, has still made her living as a prostitute. She may show strong character in some areas, for example, when Emilia insults her, she comes back with,

" I am no strumpet, but of life as honest

As you that thus abuse me."

This shows that she is prepared to stand up for herself and her lifestyle, implying that she believes it is right.

It is important when performing Desdemona to a modern audience to portray the strength of her beliefs. Bradley has described Desdemona as " helplessly passive" and I believe that this view of Desdemona should be avoided. To achieve maximum impact with a modern audience, it is important not to show Desdemona as a helpless victim of abuse, or too stupid to do anything about her unhappy relationship. For Desdemona to be admired and sympathised with, it would be necessary to show her stronger qualities. The reason she allows Othello to treat her with such disrespect is not because she is passive or helpless.

She has already shown courage when she first appeared in the play, betraying her father for her love of Othello, and speaking out in front of the

Senate. Her dogmatic nature, belief in pure love and loyalty to Othello are the qualities that would achieve a maximum impact with a modern audience. However, it would also be important to show her youth and innocence, being careful not to confuse this with stupidity. She always knows what she is doing, even though it is sometimes misconceived. When standing up for Cassio to Othello, it would be important to show her feminine charms and kind intentions. This would make it believable for Othello to suspect her of adultery, as her nature is so friendly.

Emilia appears to be the most modern character of the three women in Othello. Her views on marriage would be much appreciated by a modern audience and her cynicism and wit would be found amusing. Many modern women could easily relate to Emilia. Portraying her mature, worldly personality would be very effective with a modern audience. It would also be important to show her loyalty, especially to Iago. It is clear that Emilia loves Iago as she stands by him throughout the play, until she discovers the real truth about him. According to Bradley, Emilia "remains perfectly true to herself", but this is not true. Iago has a great influence over Emilia's actions, and because of Iago, Emilia compromises her own judgement.

In stealing Desdemona's handkerchief she is doing something that she knows is wrong, but she does it all the same, just to gain the love of her husband. Showing his power over her would create sympathy for her. Her belief in her husband's honest nature, along with everyone else's, is part of the tragedy of Othello. At the end of the play however, Emilia's common sense returns and her most important scene would need to be performed

effectively to create maximum impact. To do this it would be necessary to show Emilia's anger, frustration, hurt and disgust. The character of Emilia is very likeable with a modern audience, and it would be important not to lose any of her strong, amusing and loyal qualities.

Performing Bianca would be a difficult task. Her character has little substance and it would be easy to lose her in a performance. Within the play she is mainly ridiculed and insulted. A modern audience could show admiration for her when she approaches Cassio about the handkerchief he gave her. As an actress, it would be important to show Bianca's strength here, and her belief in herself. Bianca could also be sympathised with as her love for Cassio is unrequited and despite her attempts to woo him, he only ridicules her.

In general, a modern audience can sympathise with all the women in the play. All, despite their strengths, suffer at the hands of the men in their lives. Desdemona's unfaltering belief in pure love only results in Othello's killing her. Emilia's loyalty and strength leads her to being murdered, also by her own husband. Bianca's love for Cassio only brings her ridicule. In a modern society this supports the radical feminist view that no relationship with a man is beneficial to a woman. Each woman displays different feminine qualities. Desdemona's approach is obedience, Emilia's is loyalty and Bianca's, persistence, but none of these bring them any rewards.

The women in Othello are so often misunderstood. The majority of criticism on the play is written by males and there is very little comment on the



female characters at all. This has led to difficulty in performing these characters to create a

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maximum impact with a modern audience. However, their roles are clear. They all show the negative qualities in the male characters, but at the same time have an effect on their lives. The play is a domestic tragedy but the effects of the domestic lives of the characters are shown in all aspects of their lives. The misunderstanding of Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca, within the play and in audiences has led to misinterpretations of their characters. To create a maximum impact with a modern audience, the female characters need to be given their own personality, and the effects they have need to be shown. Without the women going to war with their husbands, the tragedy of Othello would be a very different one.