

# Comparing the depiction of women in othello, the taming of the shrew, and death O...

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A study comparing and contrasting the dramatists' use and representation of women in the tragedies, *Othello* and *Death of a Salesman*, and the comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew* with close reference to the texts, their contexts and a selection of literary criticism.

Shakespeare presents women in a variety of ways, with each nuance reflecting popular conceptions of the time. While wrong to suggest that women during the Elizabethan period were ceaselessly oppressed in every aspect of life, it is impossible to ignore the fact that their heavily patriarchal society implemented a religiously-imposed system of male-dominance. To a contemporary audience, especially a post-feminist one, the belief that women were more akin to animals than angels and not only inferior to men but the physical property of their husbands seems abhorrent. It is during this period that Shakespeare crafted the tragedy, *Othello*, and the (albeit controversial) comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*. Through analysis of the different characterisations of women, and comparison with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, much can be gleaned about the Elizabethan role of women. Furthermore, contrasting post-war America with the late 16th century will determine just how similarly these worlds regarded women, whether their writers challenged perceived expectations or merely echoed the opinions of their periods. There is a contentious debate regarding Shakespeare's personal beliefs and whether he truly was misogynistic, or of a more liberal nature unbecoming his time. By examining not only the role women play in his texts, but also their reception by other characters, the imagery pertaining them and how this negates or reflects the contextual

background, it shall be decided whether it truly is 'the world which offends us, not Shakespeare.'

Religion dominated the 16th century, and while this is not particularly prominent in either *Othello* or *The Taming of the Shrew*, its eminence has severe consequences for both the treatment and reception of women in society. The Medieval Church imposed a system of thinking whereby, as aptly described by Marian Cox, women were either 'virgins and saints or whores and devils.' The two sisters, Katherina and Bianca, are key examples of this - the use of antonyms sees the former presented as a 'fiend of hell' and the latter revered as 'Minerva' the goddess. There is no middle ground; if a woman was not like the Virgin Mary, she was the Whore of Babylon. The view of women as heavenly or pure largely stems from the description of others, here Cassio is the main culprit, claiming that Desdemona 'paragons description' and that her creation 'does tire the ingener'. While her loyalty and devotion to Othello until the bitter end - asking 'commend me to my kind lord', the very same "kind lord" who had smothered her moments before - shows a purity rarely seen elsewhere, this is tainted by naivety, the flaw of her youth. Her shock at the thought of a woman cuckolding her husband is contrasted by the more worldly view of Emilia. Cassio, infinitely hyperbolic in his descriptions, labels her simply as 'perfection'. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, this view of women as perfect is questioned by Shakespeare. Bianca is understood by her numerous suitors to be the ideal wife - she is modest, obedient and submissive to the whims of her father, answering 'sir, to your pleasure humbly I subscribe' to a request which

threw Kate, her apparent opposite, into a fit of rage. However, much like the use of disguises throughout the play (which sees Lucentio become Cambio and Tranio become Lucentio) Bianca's "perfection" is seen to be superficial. Tested for obedience Bianca replies 'that she is busy, and she cannot come', revealing that these exceptional qualities are a mere front. Here Shakespeare challenges the idea of women being admired as flawless, due to the 'shrew' of the tale providing a seemingly more contented marriage than the supposed 'daughter of Agenor'. The uses of classical allusion in reference to Bianca are revealed to be shallow, correct in describing her beauty but nothing else. Shakespeare, then, defies this quality as being no more present in women than in men.

However, while the idea of purity is debated, the expectations of women both in marriage and society were a cemented concept. The aforementioned characteristics (thought to be possessed by Bianca) required a woman to be humble, obedient and subordinate to her husband. In this sense it is not too difficult to introduce Miller's Linda. Despite existing in two very different worlds, the qualities of an ideal wife are more similar than one might expect. Willy clearly dominates the relationship, with Linda's opinions often overruled and ignored much in the same way Elizabethan women were believed to be without any jurisdiction: 'Willy, darling, you're the handsomest man in the world - Oh, no Linda'. She is rarely seen to contradict her husband and her speech revolves around comforting him or seeing to his needs. Although this does not bear the rigid conformities of Elizabethan society, her attitude as a wife pertains many of the qualities

expected around 300 years earlier. Miller imposes the same divide between “motherly” woman (reflecting the Virgin Mary expectation) and whore. Biff and Happy debate the need to find a girl ‘with substance’ like their mother, with the attractions of ‘gorgeous creatures’. Even Willy is drawn to this dilemma, caught between the woman he had an affair with and his wife. Little has changed between the two periods in the belief that women could only be either of marriageable qualities or prone to infidelity.

Consequently there exists the opposite presentation, women who are ‘sport for Jove’, as Iago summarises. The most tenacious vindicator of this view is the antagonist of Othello. His epigram reflects popular criticisms of the time, ascertaining that women were only useful ‘to suckle fools and chronicle small beer.’ Shakespeare’s portrayal of Iago is key in determining the validity of this view; depicted as the creator of chaos and responsible for the death of both the innocent Desdemona and his once loyal wife, he is also denounced in the denouement as a ‘viper’ and a ‘villain’. By ensuring he receives no sympathy from the audience, it could similarly be argued that no sympathy is intended for his view on women. The bitter phrases with which he describes them – ‘you rise to play and go to bed to work’ – are entirely dismissed by the actions of the women throughout the play. Just as *The Taming of the Shrew* lacks any example of a woman behaving in an adulterous manner, so too does *Othello* – excluding Bianca, known to be a courtesan of sorts, both Desdemona and Olivia are innocent of any crimes. Lisa Jardine examines how the ‘charge of sexual promiscuity’ was the ‘most readily available form of assault on a woman’s reputation’. In light of this,

Iago's accusation of Othello having 'done his office' with his wife Emilia is entirely unfounded and certainly never proven - indeed, after the initial mention in his soliloquy it is not heard of again - and the fabricated evidence of Desdemona's betrayal hardly needs mention. Just as Shakespeare challenges the view of women as "perfect", so too does this mirror a disbelief in the alternate end of the spectrum. These women are clearly not the stereotypical whores who, according to religious philosophy, constitute half the population.

As Jardine explains, this charge was easy to produce and difficult to deny; the simplicity of it certainly ensnares Othello, leaving him to lament 'we can call these delicate creatures ours, and not their appetites.' The ease at which this 'pestilence' is accepted is irrefutably the fault of Othello's hamartia, his jealousy, yet why is the charge of infidelity so readily administered and more readily still accepted? Although this could infer that such crimes were commonplace in the Elizabethan period - certainly women of Venice are accused 'they do let God see the pranks they dare not show their husbands' - instead it relates to the unequivocal imbalance between male and female. A woman possessed little more than her reputation; if this was besmirched, then she was forever destroyed: Desdemona's death in the conclusion of Othello mirrors how truly damning such a blow was. Thus men were almost permitted to have affairs which can be seen to have continued far beyond Shakespeare's time. In *Death of a Salesman*, while secretive, Willy's affair resembles a persistent, yet much less constitutional, idea that men were allowed certain rights which women were not. Indeed, the sexual vivacity

with which Biff and Happy set about 'ruining' other women in relationships reveals how one-sided the issue remains: for a man to have sex freely with women was sport, but for a woman to do the same meant that she was despoiled. The continuous referencing to this 'sense of competition' and the fact that only two types of women existed in Miller's play not only echoes a society which still regarded males with a much greater sexual freedom, but also suggests that the playwright did not see fit to challenge this.

To fully understand the views of women it is vital to investigate the full range of opinions in society. While the subservience of women was the dominant understanding, the Elizabethan audience cannot be said to have a single mind-set, no more than could a modern audience be said to be feminist or egalitarian. For example, the Puritans held a view of "companionate marriage" whereby a daughter was allowed to query an arranged marriage so that mutual happiness was reached in the relationship. Much more commonly, though, the father chose the worthiest suitor (often influenced by the man's wealth), as witnessed with Baptista's decree that he would not 'bestow his youngest daughter before [he had] a husband for the elder'. Similarly the father's right to decide the fate of his daughter is echoed by Brabantio's horror at Desdemona's elopement, convincing him that she must have been won by 'foul charms'. Combined, these reveal the dominance of father over daughter, later to be transferred to her husband. The only time in which a woman was free to possess or to act of her own accord was when she was widowed and her husband's property passed to her. However, this was quickly ended when she remarried and her brief wealth was swallowed

by her new husband. So it can be seen how, as a daughter, the woman was little more than the vassal of her father.

The most delicate issue concerning women is, of course, the training of Katherina. It is a highly controversial subject which has furiously divided critics; Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch stated that 'The Taming of the Shrew belongs to a period', but this is not as simple as it may seem. Here this could be disagreed with due to the public reception at the time - undeniably, Kate's new reformed state is that which society demanded, but the methods themselves still drew complaint. Clear evidence of this comes in the form of Fletcher's *The Tamer Tamed*, a play written shortly after Shakespeare's work and intended as an answer. Such a response evidentially marks outcry against the treatment of Kate, depicting a society which was not barbaric in its belief of social conventions. While the "end-product" is desirable, the methods used to reach this angered many, proving another example of how the opinions of an entire population cannot be generalised. The Great Chain of Being was a religiously-imposed system of order, whereby men were deemed to be "above" women, closer to angels while women were more akin to animals. The Anglican Homily on Marriage claimed 'ye wives be in subjection to your husbands... for the husband is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church'. Women were then, in a sense, doctrinally subjugated. Furthermore, Stevie Davies explains how 'a married woman did not, in law, exist'; 'she could not own property because she was property'. Petruchio's speech on his wedding day effectively summarises this idea, he argues 'she is my goods, my chattels; she is my house... my ox, my ass, my



anything.' In this sense women are not even presented as humans, merely as further assets of their husbands.

This mercantile theme is coupled with the contrast of powers in relationships. Here there is a conflict concerning Desdemona, Emilia and Kate. Originally, Emilia seeks meekly only to satisfy her husband - 'I nothing but to please his fantasy' - but as the play progresses into its conclusion she shows determination and firm willpower to defy Iago, arguing 'I will not charge my tongue; I am bound to speak.' Accompanying this growth in strength, Desdemona follows an opposing trend, stooping from a bold character who openly and publicly defies her father to a submissive wife who cannot even speak ill of the man who kills her. In these two progressions, the audience is supposed to admire Emilia for her fieriness (due to her opposition to the villain of the plot) and pity Desdemona. Contrastingly, Kate's training forms the denouement of the comedy, a device which shows the completion of the play and a return to the correct order of things - this is symbolised by Kate's final speech urging others 'froward and unable worms' to understand and comply to the mastery of their husbands. These conflicting messages could, perhaps, be explained by the nature of both Desdemona and Emilia's husbands. As with the Puritan view of companionate marriage, if a husband was as malicious and manipulative as Iago, it could possibly have been socially acceptable to defy him. Similarly, Desdemona's fall to a more submissive, less outspoken wife draws sympathy by the nature of her jealous husband and the perseverance of her innocence.

Nevertheless, it was a period of male dominance concerning the power in a relationship.

Furthermore, this can be seen in *Death of a Salesman*, as Willy constantly interrupts Linda and more often than not fails to appreciate what she says: 'Willy, wildly enthused, to Linda: stop interrupting'. As the stage directions show, it is his right to dictate the conversation, and any opposition angers him. While nowhere near the extent of Elizabethan oppression, it nonetheless echoes a tradition which one would have thought 300 years would have eroded. The final section of this debate sets upon the extremely controversial topic of Shakespeare's personal view on the role of women, and how effectively this can be gleaned from his texts. It is often difficult to separate the authorial voice from the interpretations of the characters which are, of course, mere fictional creations. As described throughout the essay, the Elizabethan period was a patriarchal society where women possessed very few rights. In light of this, the expected general presentation of women in Shakespeare's plays should reflect either the fiery, destructive whores or the saintly creatures of perfection (or, at the very least, submissive and humble wives).

However, this is very rarely the case. Emilia's long speech in *Othello* (possibly even as contentious as Shylock's) suggests an ideal which looks suspiciously like the roots of feminism, or at the very least a cry for gender equality. She likens man's desires with that of womankind, asking 'have we not affections, desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?' This contrasts so powerfully with Kate's closing speech that it could be seen to be its

antithesis, judging that her words are taken literally and not ironically. Kate urges wives to recognise their husbands under the domineering terms 'thy lord, thy king, thy governor', which has produced many 'disgusted responses'.

Furthermore, the actual training of Kate inspired a wave of harsh criticism and many claims of misogyny. While such methods cannot be justified, there are a number of factors which suggest Shakespeare was more liberal-minded than this play makes him seem. Firstly, although there is some debate as to the validity of this, it is often supposed that Shakespeare based his play on an earlier work by an anonymous author called *A Merry Jest of a Shrewde and Curste Wyfe*. As supported by Anne Barton, 'by comparison with the husband who binds his erring spouse, beats her, bleeds her into a state of debility or incarcerates her inside the salted skin of a dead horse... Petruchio - although no Romeo - is almost a model of intelligence and humanity.'

Moreover it is important to note that although Kate is subjected to lack of food and lack of sleep, Petruchio bears these same challenges. So while his training methods are far from acceptable, especially to a contemporary audience, the degree of variation from the original and the fact that Petruchio endures the same deprivations could suggest a less harsh judgement than superficially expected.

Another method of justifying 'the taming' references the themes of 'acting', 'dreaming' and 'game-playing' which Thompson suggests presents it as 'deliberately distanced', thereby surmising that 'Shakespeare himself shared

our uneasiness.' This interlinks with his severe reduction in the scale of training from the (supposed) original inspiration of the Shrewde and Curste Wyfe, and is further supported by his inclusion of the Induction. Regarding the difference between authorial voice and the intended opinions of Shakespeare's characters, Iago's use of rhyming couplets represents well-known criticisms of the time, for example claiming women were 'players in their housewifery, and housewives in their beds.' While this could be interpreted as the playwright's own views, that verdict begs the question: why is it not a more admirable character who delivers these lines? By the very characterisation of Iago, the audience know him to be manipulative and a 'devil', thus they are told similarly to discount his views. More credit is given to the passionate speech conducted by Emilia. Therefore, while the process of 'taming' is a detrimental presentation of women, this is combatted by the wisdom and power of Emilia's speech, the use of other themes to contradict the harshness of Petruchio's treatment, as well as the prominence of these female characters and the distinct lack of infidels or whores, all of which prove that Shakespeare did not impose a misogynistic ideal but rather 'used the theatre to explore the real nature of women.'

In conclusion, Shakespeare casts a variety of roles for his women thus exploring an intricate combination of representations. In contrast to Arthur Miller's more two-dimensional approach, where there exists only 'gorgeous creatures' or motherly figures of 'substance', Shakespeare's portrayal examines many nuances which reflect popular conceptions and misconceptions of his period. Through the perceptions of male characters,

women are depicted as being prizes, the possessions of their husbands, adulterous or 'perfection.' While the restraints of his time meant that women were doctrinally subjugated and almost without rights, little of this is reflected in his plays. Despite the controversial training of Kate (which can be somewhat remedied by reference to the *Shrewde and Curste Wyfe*), Shakespeare's women are thoroughly prominent throughout, which caused Thompson to remark that they 'seem absolutely (and at times mysteriously) superior to his men.'<sup>10</sup> This can be evidenced by Emilia's long, almost feminist, speech, by Desdemona's prevailing innocence and by the sheer contrast between the opinions of the male characters and the true substance of the female characters. Thus by not only exploring but challenging these popular criticisms of women - most openly voiced by the despised antagonist Iago - it can be said that Shakespeare did not write with misogynistic tendencies but with a more liberal mind than one would expect in the Elizabethan period.