

Handkerchief: symbolism, role and metaphor

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Shakespeare weaves an intricate web ensnaring the characters in *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. A handkerchief, a small and seemingly insignificant square of fabric, exerts magical powers over the characters as it transfers from person to person in the play. Six characters take possession of the handkerchief. Three (Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia) die violent deaths, one (Cassio) is gravely wounded, another (Bianca) is imprisoned for a murder she did not commit, and Iago—who used the handkerchief for his own evil machinations—faces the death penalty. When Iago says that “we work by wit and not by witchcraft,” he is not giving the handkerchief due credit for its abetment in his plots (2. 3. 393). The handkerchief, shrouded in mystery, is a character in its own right that takes the stage at pivotal moments.

The handkerchief makes rounds through the characters. We first see it when Desdemona offers to bind Othello’s head to ease the ache, but Othello, beguiled by Iago’s artifice, refuses the proffered tenderness. Emilia retrieves the dropped handkerchief with the intention of copying the work for Iago, but instead hands the original over to Iago even though she knows Desdemona will “run mad/ When she shall lack it” (3. 3. 365-366). Iago leaves the handkerchief in Cassio’s lodgings where Cassio finds it and asks his lover to copy the work before he searches for the rightful owner. Bianca, incredulous that Cassio would ask her to take out the work of what she believes to be “some minx’s token,” returns the handkerchief to Cassio, while Othello looks on from the shadows.

The handkerchief works its magic on each of these characters in its own way. Emilia feigns ignorance of the handkerchief’s deposition and her husband’s

contrivance. Emilia's lack of interjection in 3. 4 contradicts her vigorous championing of her lady in 5. 2 that belies not necessarily malice toward Desdemona, but a wicked spell cast by the handkerchief that keeps Emilia from putting a stop to the misunderstanding when presented with the opportunity. Iago has an inclination of revenge toward Othello and Cassio, but it is not until the handkerchief finds its way to him that this plan starts to form. Even though the cloth is a "trifles light as air," Iago realizes the power held within and puts it in Cassio's bedchamber with the hope that, "This may do something" (3. 3. 370, 372). Cassio is taken in by the handkerchief's charm, but it leaves him unmoved. Its effect on Bianca, on the other hand, is more apparent. At first Bianca is complacent to "be circumstanced" by Cassio's terms, but after taking hold of the handkerchief, her eyes are opened and she seems prepared to present Cassio with an ultimatum. When Bianca returns the handkerchief to Cassio, Othello observes the handoff. Seeing the handkerchief in Cassio's hands provides the "ocular proof" Othello demands in 3. 3. 412. A simple square of cloth holds enough weight to condemn Desdemona to death.

The handkerchief's provenance is obscure. Othello claims that "It was a handkerchief, an antique token/ My father gave my mother" in the last act (5. 2. 256-257), but it appears to be more of a magical article in the guise of an ordinary object. As the handkerchief makes its way from character to character, it leaves a trail of destruction in its wake.