

The significance of emilia's character

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In Shakespeare's play, Othello, the character Emilia is essential in exploring the theme of gender and the expectations placed on women. The anonymous writer of, "From Counsel to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction" believes the answer to maintaining a happy marriage is for both men and women to know and respect the role God has given them (279). Through the character of Emilia, Shakespeare challenges the idea that if a woman is ideal in the role given to her, and an obedient wife, then she will be able to maintain a happy and successful marriage.

The anonymous writer states that, "the highest degree of society is between the husband and the wife," (278). In Othello Emilia is married to Iago, which means her greatest allegiance is to him, and we see this when it comes to the handkerchief. Emilia is Desdemona's attendant, but also as readers see, her friend and confidant. However, when Desdemona drops the handkerchief given to her by her husband, Emilia picks it up and gives it to her own husband Iago. Although she has no idea why Iago had been asking for it or what he intended to do with it, she states, "I nothing but to please his fantasy." (3. 3. 343.) She is doing what a wife was expected to do and maintaining the "highest degree of society". The anonymous writer also mentioned that in terms of a body, the husband is the head while the wife is made the body (279). This can be interpreted as the husband is the brains and the control, while the wife is physically going through motions she is told to do, a situation that can be compared the handkerchief scene and Shakespeare's portrayal of obedient Emilia and the controlling and manipulative Iago.

The idea that maintaining a relationship and being loyal to one's husband is important for a happy marriage is challenged by Shakespeare. The action of Emilia handing over the handkerchief to Iago unknowingly sets in motion the ultimate end to their marriage. When Emilia discovers that her loyalty and obedience to her husband has gotten her in a horrible situation, she acknowledges that, "'Tis proper I obey him, but not now.'" (5. 2. 233).

Shakespeare has Emilia realize that being loyal and obedient to her husband, what a good wife is supposed to do, has landed her in trouble. Ultimately, this challenges the anonymous writer's idea that being loyal and obedient to one's husbands before others will guarantee them a happy marriage. The anonymous writer also comments that to maintain a happy marriage, man and women should obey the roles God gave them, "they must look unto God's wisdom, order... [and] each much keep their place, their order, and heavenly polity," (279). The role of a woman as a wife was to be loyal, obedient, and helpful to their husband. Wives were expected to, especially by God, be monogamous and not commit adultery. Shakespeare challenges this expectation of God's and the anonymous writer's through Emilia.

When Desdemona asks Emilia if she would ever cheat on her husband, Iago, Emilia replies of course she would. She claims, "I would not do such a thing for a joint ring, nor for measure of lawn...But for the whole world—Who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for 't"(4. 3. 82-87). If it were to move Iago up in the social world, especially to the standing of nobility, or course Emilia would cheat on him. Is this not an expected role of a wife, to help their husbands maintain a good

social standard? She is doing this for him, in a way being loyal to him in helping him achieve greatness.

However, it does not seem this is what the anonymous writer had in mind when they were stating that the women were put on this earth to be ideal wives, to help and be obedient to their husbands. It is certainly not what God would have had in mind when creating women to be wives. If a wife were to cheat on her husband, that wife would no longer have a happy and successful marriage. But if the husband were to become king because of these actions I am sure he would find happiness in his tainted marriage. Shakespeare is once again challenging anonymous' ideas about what guarantees a successful and happy marriage. Emilia in Othello genuinely tried to be an ideal wife for Iago. Shakespeare was able to manipulate the character though so the actions have different consequences than intended. This then challenges some of the ideas presented in the anonymous writing piece, " From Counsel to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction".

Works Cited Shakespeare, William. Othello. New York: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2009. Print. Anonymous. " From Counsel to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction"