

The great failure of  
othello is that  
desdemona and  
emilia are too weak  
and easily...

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The character's of Desdemona and Emilia are very different in the play Othello, but are treated in similar ways because of the fact that they are women. During the 17th century, which is when the play was written and set, women were clearly seen as the weaker sex, and so their views and judgements were not as respected as those given by a man. Iago continually deceives the both of the female characters throughout the play, and so some critics have come to the conclusion that their characters are unrealistic.

But as many of the other characters in the play also suffered from this, it is difficult to agree that this poor judge of character could be stewed as unconvincing. Shakespeare was writing his play to a Jacobean audience, and so his characters, although do represent normal people, are taken to an extreme level. He introduces the audience to three different types of women: the honest, beautiful, witty and dearly devoted wife, the shrewd but helpful maid and the socially unacceptable prostitute.

Iago is Emilia's husband, so she should have been aware of his true intentions to destroy Othello. This is a great criticism in the character of Emilia, as she witnesses many of the events that occurred, but is unable to put the pieces together until it is too late. The marriage between Iago and Emilia is clearly not as close and loving as Othello and Desdemona's was, and so could explain the lack of information about Iago's motives that she received.

This could also strengthen the validity of the characters, especially Emilia, for not all marriages were as blissfully happy as Desdemona and Othello's, and so portrays the other side to society. Therefore the character's are not

entirely drawn from life, for it is unlikely that many people could claim they are as noble as Desdemona, who continues to defend her husband's name even after he has tarnished her own.

Emilia is obviously an intelligent woman, as she is the only one who is able to realise that it is Iago who is to blame for all of the problems that have occurred. She does suspect Iago of not being honest when she gives him the handkerchief asking him: " what will you do with't, that you have been so earnest to have me flinch it? " Emilia does not attempt to go any further with her questioning, and so instead of going with her instincts she chooses to believe in her husband, and forget about it.

It is also Emilia who later suspects that Othello believes that Desdemona is a whore because somebody has been spreading lies about her: " The Moor's abused by some most villainous knave" but again is told to keep quiet by Iago, and so she does. The character of Emilia is one who although is outspoken, is also very dutiful, and knows her place. She represents a lot of women during that period, who although had the intellect, were constantly belittled by either the husbands (as is Emilia) or men in general, so remained silent.

One of the problems with Shakespeare's decision to make Emilia not discover that it was all Iago's fault until it is too late, is that she is portrayed as a person who likes to know other people's business. An example of this is after Othello has left Desdemona in Act 4, one of the first things she asks Desdemona is " what's the matter with my Lord" and so it seems strange

that something as confusing as Othello's accusations did not intrigue her into finding out more.

There was a lot of racism in England during the 17th century, and so Desdemona's decision to marry a black man was not only unusual in the play, but would have been the same views expressed by the Jacobean audience. Many people saw black people as Devils, and believed that they were destined to Hell. Desdemona obviously did not share this view, as she was a devoted Christian, and so would not have falling in love with something unholy. Desdemona's actions are once again put into questioning, for if she was a realistic character would she have married Othello, even though he himself states that he is damned?

Desdemona is portrayed at the beginning of the play as a strong minded woman who stands up to her father in order to marry Othello: " And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, So much I challenge I profess due to the Moor my Lord" Desdemona also stands up to Iago later on when he teases Emilia, and so her characteristics cannot then be described as weak, timid or vulnerable as she dismisses all of these features early on in the play. It must therefore be thought that the betrayal she felt from Othello must have not only confused her but also diminished her confidence.

Emilia's realisation at the end of the play is accepted by everyone, because it is both logical and because Iago's reaction of killing Emilia. This is the first time in the play when she has actually been listened to, without Iago being

able to quiet her before she actually makes the connection between the current situation and Iago's presence. Emilia is finally able to find her voice, although ironically it is too late to save Desdemona. Therefore it may not be the fact that she is a woman, which makes her case unconvincing to the other characters, but the way she is constantly belittled by Iago.

The character of Desdemona is unconvincing in the sense that she is so moral and pure and completely devoted to Othello, even in death. The character would probably not represent a large number of 17th century people. But if the term convincing was meant that characters in the play would take her allegations seriously then she holds a lot more weight. She is from a wealthy, respected family, and is married to a successful General, and so had gained the respect of important figures such as the Duke.

Therefore if she were really convinced that Iago had orchestrated the entire situation then people would at least listen to her views, even if they did not believe them. Emilia is the opposite of Desdemona; for her kind and honest nature mixed with her crude and sometimes insensitive remarks, makes her a very realistic character. She on the other hand if suggested that it was Iago who has poisoned Othello's thought may not be as easily believed. The fact that she is Iago's wife, may have allowed her a little more respect, but she is still a wife of an ensign whose occupation is that of a maid.

Shakespeare uses the women cleverly in the play, as they are the least likely to be believed, but ironically are the ones who discover the truth. If Emilia had been encouraged to continue to expand on her thoughts then she would

have probably unmasked the truth earlier. But because it was always Iago who was insisting on her to remain quiet, she was not given the opportunity to do so. It can therefore be said that it was not the fact that they were weak that made them unconvincing, but because they were never given the chance, as Iago, a clever manipulator, was always around to stop them before they revealed him as the liar that he is.