

Sexual politics and gender discourse

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In “ Women and Men in Othello: ‘ what should such a fool/Do with so good a woman?’,” critic Carol Thomas Neely asserts that nearly all rational thought in Othello comes from women. In Neely’s view, the men of Othello are too consumed by pride, jealousy, and socio-political pressure to think clearly and, as a result, resort to rash behavior and “ destroy the women who make fools of them” (142) in order to preserve their sense of honor. While Neely may be correct here, her argument that the women of Othello are entirely sensible is not a strong one. If these women were fully rational, they would be concerned with self-preservation and might not meet such tragic ends. Instead, the females remain passive and allow the hot-headed men to do most of the fighting in the battle of the sexes that is William Shakespeare’s Othello. This paper examines the development and outcomes of that battle.

One example of Othello’s sexual politics has to do with double standards. The men of Othello are exempt from the traits highly valued in women, such as Desdemona’s purity and devotion. While Desdemona’s purity is “ blackened” by her undying love for Othello (Adelman 126), Othello’s masculinity and reputation as something of a Casanova earn him respect and admiration. Indeed, Othello’s “ conquest” of the woman his men most desire does as much to boost their opinion of him as does his rank of general. Julia Genster writes that the bonds formed in military ranks have a direct correlation to a sexual power structure (785); the soldiers’ desire for Desdemona and power – both Othello’s “ possessions” – therefore creates an intriguing sexual dynamic between Othello, his wife and his men.

While genuine “ male friendship, like male courage, is, in the play, sadly deteriorated from the Renaissance ideal,” (Neely 144) the ideal of male

conquest and colonization runs rampant with regards to the possession and consumption of the most base materials available: women and bragging rights. Neely explains that “ since the reputation and manliness which the men covet is achieved in competition with others, all of them are ‘ jealous in honor’” (143). For instance, Neely explains, “ Iago is critical and envious and resentful—of Cassio’s position and ‘ daily beauty,’ of Othello’s love and power, perhaps even of Rodrigo’s wealth and rank” (143). The decisions of Iago and the other men to act on their foul, jealous impulses are considered to be acts of honor. If Othello were to stand by a woman rumored to have been unfaithful, he would be effectively emasculated in the public eye. It is the fear of a loss in credibility or reputation that pushes the jealous men to act irrationally, and it is that cold, political pressure which allows them to continue in their veritable cockfight, even in the face of tragic consequences.

Even though the women of Othello bear the brunt of these tragic consequences, the argument still stands that they are more rational and less competitive than the men. Neely points out that “ Desdemona’s willingness to ‘ incur a general mock’ is evident in her elopement and her defense of it, and in her request to go to Cyprus” (145), and that “ Emilia braves scorn to defend her mistress, ‘ Let heaven, and men, and devils, let ‘ em all/All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak’ (V. ii. 222-23)” (145). Because they do not fear damage to their reputations, the women remain more objective and less hot-headed than the men.

Perhaps the most direct symbol of peacekeeping and the sweet-talking ways of women in Othello is the handkerchief. While the men are the active

soldiers in the battle of the sexes, women are passive only in that their words are more abundant than actions. As Neely writes, the handkerchief “ is a symbol of a woman’s civilizing power” that, because of its origin, “ represents sexuality controlled by chastity” and serves “ to induce love and control it” (149). Desdemona uses it this way until it is lost and its charmed effects dissipate.

For all their efforts in peacekeeping, the women of Othello never truly resolve the rift between themselves and the men. The most obvious explanation for this is that the men killed them off before any true peace could be found; however, the play’s theme of combat suggests an irreconcilable difference between the sexes brought on by society’s double standard. In Act V, scene ii, just before killing Desdemona, Othello says “ yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (Shakespeare V. ii.) – an odd statement when one considers that it was Othello who was the adulterer. A critic could argue that Desdemona’s murder was Othello’s guilty conscience manifesting itself in homicide, but it is more likely that the ever-prideful, irrational male felt threatened by the notion that his wife would step into his role as conqueror. His fear seems irrational, but to be fair, Desdemona also seems unrealistic in her belief that Othello’s love for her would override his desperate desire to prove his strength.

No sex is entirely culpable for this play’s final tragedy, as the lack of communication between the men and women of Othello is very much two-sided. While the men actively created chaos that led to the violent conclusion, the women remained loyal peacemakers. From a modern

perspective the women's decision seems highly irrational – why wouldn't they assert themselves to save their own lives? – but within the play's cultural norms and accepted structure of sexual politics, they were simply fulfilling their accepted gender roles.

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