

Desdemona as representation of power and possession

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At first glance, Shakespeare's Desdemona may seem like woman remarkable for her beauty and not much else. In fact, Desdemona is a foil and a catalyst who wields power over men who desire her. The male characters in Othello want to control Desdemona because possession of a woman like Desdemona gives them status and a sense of power; she drives them to commit acts of rage, pride, and jealousy. This is best illustrated by Desdemona's relationships with Othello, Brabantio, and Iago. It is also symbolized by Desdemona's handkerchief, which comes to represent both desire and conflict.

Desdemona's father, Brabantio, treats her as an object through which he defines himself. He is a Venetian senator and favors Othello, the Moorish general of the Venetian forces. But when his daughter, Desdemona, decides to marry Othello, he is outraged. Iago, Othello's ensign, says "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1. 1. 85-86)". Out of rage, Brabantio tries to stop the marriage from happening, blames Desdemona's decision on Othello's alleged use of witchcraft, and even goes to plea to the duke to stop the marriage, but realizes there is nothing he can do. He tells the duke Desdemona is dead to him and that she "Blushed at herself; and she- in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit, everything- / To fall in love with what she feared to look on?" (1. 3. 96-98). Brabantio has objectified Desdemona, as exemplified by the way he imposes certain qualities upon her. According to him, she has years, country, and credit - all qualities that he, as an old senator, possesses more himself than does Desdemona. Brabantio also claims Desdemona feared to look at Othello, which is plainly untrue. Brabantio thereby reveals that he has been secretly afraid of Othello

and projects this fear onto Desdemona. Also, Brabantio is concerned about Desdemona more because of how she affects his reputation than anything else. As long as Desdemona is a pretty trifle to show off – like a fancy handkerchief – Brabantio is pleased with her. Men who want to be seen as brave, noble gentleman must have delicate, innocent daughters; the juxtaposition between the men and their daughters' femininity highlights the men's masculinity. Desdemona's marriage to Othello mars her femininity in Brabantio's opinion, and thus mars his masculinity and takes away some of his power as a man.

The power Othello gains by marrying Desdemona is the power of assimilation into Venetian society. He has already been accepted by the other important men as a great general and talented storyteller, but not as one of them. When he marries Desdemona, he becomes a part of society, but his station is artificial because it is only provided by his marriage to Desdemona. Just as Desdemona represents Othello's connection to Venetian society, the handkerchief Othello gives Desdemona as a wedding gift represents the couple's connection to each other. It is white with strawberries embroidered onto it, a symbol of Desdemona's purity and chastity, because the red strawberries are reminiscent of the bloodstains on the sheets after a virgin has consummated her marriage. Desdemona's chastity, as manifested in the handkerchief, allows Othello to transcend his status as general into more powerful masculinity. At the end of the play, Emilia refers to the handkerchief as a "trifle" (5. 2. 228); this trifle is the center of catastrophe in the play.

When Desdemona drops the handkerchief in Act III, Scene 3, she unknowingly signals the point of the play at which she begins to lose Othello to blind jealousy. She offers to bind Othello's head with the handkerchief when he says he has a headache, and he brushes her off saying, "Your napkin is too little; / Let it alone" (3. 3. 289-290). Just before this, Othello has a conversation with Iago in which Iago tells him to "observe [Desdemona] well with Cassio" (3. 3. 199). Iago has made Othello suspicious of Desdemona's relationship with Cassio, his lieutenant. In his suspicion, the handkerchief becomes simply a meaningless "napkin."

Iago, the play's villain, also bases his actions around Desdemona. He beguiles his wife, Emilia, to steal Desdemona's handkerchief, and it becomes a source of power for him as he uses it to manipulate situations to his liking. The handkerchief becomes an extension of the power that Desdemona used to embody. Iago tells the audience he "will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin / And let him find it" (3. 3. 322-323). His whole plan is to point out to Othello that Cassio has the handkerchief, therefore proving to Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are engaging in an affair. Just like the handkerchief, Iago is not what he seems. Earlier in the play, he says, "I am not what I am" (1. 1. 65). Iago makes himself appear like a dutiful ensign, when in reality, he is evil and cunning. He would otherwise be an unimportant person in the world of Desdemona and Othello, just as the handkerchief would be an unimportant object if Iago did not imbue it with importance as the center of his plans. Iago is motivated by his admiration of Desdemona, yet his jealousy provokes him to sabotage her by making her husband suspicious of her.

When Iago has the handkerchief, he also has Desdemona. Othello has lost all of his power; Iago can place Desdemona wherever in Othello's mind he wants her to be. When Othello asks her to "Lend me thy handkerchief" (3. 4. 52), she gives him another one, and Othello asks for the handkerchief he gave her. When she cannot produce it, he reveals to her that "there's magic in the web of it" (3. 4. 68) because an old Egyptian seer gave it to his mother, who gave it to Othello on her deathbed. The Egyptian seer told his mother "'T would make her amiable and subdue my father / Entirely to her love; but if she lost it / Or made gift of it, my father' eye / Should hold her loathed" (3. 4. 57-60). Apparently, Othello had not informed Desdemona previously about the handkerchief's exotic history or importance, since Desdemona replies by asking "Is't possible?" (3. 4. 67). Perhaps Othello never told her that if she lost it, he would loathe her because he wanted to use the handkerchief as a test of her love. Even though her love has not faltered, Desdemona's loss of the piece of cloth has caused Othello's love for her to diminish. In the same conversation, Desdemona accuses Othello of introducing the topic of the handkerchief as a means of distracting her from their previous discussion, in which she was trying to convince him to promote Cassio. This adds to Othello's jealousy, since Cassio is the target of his suspicion. Othello can focus on nothing but the handkerchief, saying, "Fetch me the handkerchief, my mind misgives-" (3. 4. 88) and exclaiming "The handkerchief!" (3. 4. 91) multiple times.

Othello feels he has lost Desdemona's love and the power associated with it, and he is driven to madness. Iago convinces Othello that the handkerchief's

existence in Cassio's possession is better proof of an affair than finding Desdemona naked in bed with Cassio; As the only "proof" of infidelity, the handkerchief causes Othello to act irrationally. He feels he must act, and nearly kills Cassio. He then goes to Desdemona and says, "That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee, / Thou gavest to Cassio" (5. 2. 48-49). She denies ever giving the handkerchief to Cassio, saying Cassio probably found it after she dropped it. Othello does not believe her, and smothers her to death. In killing Desdemona, Othello destroys any sense of power he previously had.

The possession of a woman is the key element of a man's power in Othello. Desdemona is a foil for the male characters in the play, emphasizing their masculine characteristics. Brabantio gains the power of reputation from Desdemona by being her father. Othello's marriage to Desdemona empowers him to overcome his greatest adversity, his racial difference. Iago feels powerless next to Othello, and steals his power by procuring Desdemona's handkerchief. The power Desdemona and the handkerchief represent are killed when Desdemona is smothered. Othello dies, and Iago is captured and probably killed after the end of the play. Othello ends in tragedy because the male characters do not actually exhibit personal power. Instead, they must seek artificial power from an outside source, such as a woman or an object. Sadly, the two seem to be synonymous in these men's eyes.