

In your opinion does
shakespeare
marginalise women,
or praise their
strengths ess...



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Shakespeare's Othello contains only three female characters, Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. There are many ways of interpreting these three antagonistic characters and their roles in the play. However, before we can undertake this task we have to assess the reasons behind Shakespeare's inclusion of such females. Depending on whether we take a modern reading of the play or a periodic one can change our feelings towards these three women.

For example, a modern day reading of Emilia standing up to Iago, means she did the right thing and therefore Shakespeare is praising her, but a periodic reading would show her as immoral and he is therefore victimising her, and pushing her to the edges of society. Despite the connection of women to Iago's schemes, they are neither the targets nor the stimulus for his revenge. Instead, they are relegated to tertiary roles. Nevertheless, the women still suffer the most from Iago's plans. Beyond Desdemona's obvious objectification, the women in the play are defined in sexual terms, for example Bianca is portrayed as a prostitute as Cassio refers to her as 'A customer'. Consequently, because women's roles are socially constructed as either the good woman and wife or the evil seductress, the male figures in their lives often suspect women of infidelity.

They are not seen as adjustable human beings. If women prove not to be the loyal wives and mothers, they are whores capable of deceit and manipulation, emphasising society's views of females at this time and how they were victimised according to their sexuality. Furthermore, throughout the play there is only three female characters, even the servants and clowns

are males. This echo's 'The Tempest' where Shakespeare victimises Miranda, as she is the only female character in the play.

It is argued that Shakespeare likes to have few females involved so that he can closely analyse their characters and roles in society, which is why they are so closely gender-stereotyped. The three women symbolise the three aspects of womanhood; Desdemona, the innocent and pure 'jewel', 'a maiden never bold,/ of spirit' who is moral and feminine; Emilia, a loyal wife who also defends herself and her sex 'You shall not write my praise'; and Bianca, who is used and abused by men due to the fleeting references to her as a prostitute 'huswife', 'strumpet', 'perfumed one'. This stereotypical view of women highlights how Shakespeare believes women are inferior to men, a common view of society in the seventeenth century, showing how he too marginalises women and leaves them on the edge of society. However, some people argue that Shakespeare in fact, praises women's independence and strength through the inclusion of characters such as Bianca, who do not rely on men; she is the only female survivor, suggesting that Shakespeare believes women can survive in the patriarchal society, by themselves, independent of men.

Initially we are presented with a picture of powerful womanhood from Desdemona; a daughter who has deceived her father and asserted her independence from patriarchy by choosing her own husband, 'my noble father... You are Lord of all my duty...

but here's my husband; and so much duty. 'highlighting how she is strong enough to be able to defend herself in the face of such public scrutiny.

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Furthermore, it can be argued that Iago despises Desdemona due to his mixed feelings of fear and loathing. It is possible to argue part of his contempt of Othello is located in his fear that Desdemona has power; he's been displaced by a female.

As demonstrated by Iago's sneering references to Desdemona as being the general's 'general', he cannot bear that a female has power, further accentuating Shakespeare's beliefs that women do have strength and independence. Although some critics argue that Emilia highlights society's oppression of women in society when she refers to men as 'all but stomachs', some would argue that she is wise, as she acknowledges 'we all but food: They eat us hungrily, and when they are full They belch us. emphasising her knowledge as she can see through the lies and demonstrates her realistic approach to marriage portraying Shakespeare as praising women's independence and strength to speak for themselves. However, although it can be said that Desdemona has power, she never uses it and it is her possession of power which brings about her death, as Othello believes that she is capable of infidelity, 'that cunning whore of Venice', characterising Shakespeare's belief that women cannot use power like men can, as Iago uses his power to manipulate Othello. Also, the fact that women never speak in racial or derogatory terms, shows them as moral and civilised, unlike the immoral view of Emilia which we are given due to her speech about infidelity, 'who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch? ', highlighting how Emilia would commit adultery if it got her husband the world. Yet, when looked at it this way, it can be argued

that Shakespeare praises women's strength, as she does not do it to gain for herself, but so that her husband gains.

Overall, having looked at all the evidence it is clear to see there are many possible interpretations of Shakespeare's views on women. It is clear that he victimises them by under-representing them in the play and allowing their masculine qualities to be their downfall, for example Desdemona's power, however it is clear that Shakespeare does recognise that women do have independence and strength as the women are portrayed as wise and moral whereas men are depicted as immoral and bestial. This is what society was like at the time; highly patriarchal, yet Shakespeare appears to sympathise with women in Othello and paint them in a positive light.