

Othello college essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Othello, a play dominated by strong, high-ranked combatant males, female characters are the minority. Critics have argued that Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are mostly, if not only, seen in their relationships with men, whereas the male characters are also seen in their professional roles. This feeds the view that the women in Othello are employed as devices to help manipulate the men as part of Iago's plan. The mixed-race marriage between Desdemona and Othello, in context, would have been very controversial. Their relationship would stand out to an audience, not only simply for their relationship but also because of their apparent equal standing at the start of the play. When their relationship is revealed, Othello highlights their mutual respect for one another when he asks the Duke to 'send for the lady to the Sagittary, and let her speak of me before her father', challenging patriarchy and expressing that he believes his wife should be allowed to speak for herself.

At the beginning of the play, Desdemona depicts the image of a powerful woman. She has publicly disobeyed her father using confident speech such as 'my noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty' which contrasts her father's misconception of her innocence when he addresses her as 'gentle mistress'. It could be argued, however, that even in this instance, Desdemona still fails to assert herself: although she disagrees with her father, she merely switches her 'duty' from father to husband. This is as her mother did, 'and so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father' so, realistically, it could be said that Desdemona doesn't show an independence or power in this disobedience, rather she is following what she is following a path she has been brought up to adhere to.

Also, in their marital state, Desdemona does act as a dramatic device as she brings Othello, a man who has lived his life at war, into a domestic situation where he is inexperienced. The uncertainty he feels in his position as a husband allows his obsession with Desdemona to grow as she becomes his whole world, the one person he can cling to and depend on. Because of this, Iago finds it easy to manipulate circumstances because Othello is unaccustomed to domestic life. Desdemona acts as a dramatic device to highlight Othello's status, and her acceptance of him represents his admirable qualities as a courter and a husband. To be with Othello ' She forsook so many noble matches, her father, and her country, and her friends. When Othello talks of wooing Desdemona he is portrayed as an eloquent storyteller and lover with phrases like ' she gave me for my pain a world of sighs'.

It is because of this acceptance and romance that Othello's demise is truly demonstrated to the audience, for example when Desdemona's previous ideal is compromised when she realises that ' men are not gods' and Othello's harsh description of her as a ' fair devil' where previously he would ' deny her nothing'. The downfall of Othello is marked by the destruction of their once close and trusting relationship. Desdemona is also employed as a device to increase the credibility of the plot and Iago's plan because of her kind nature and eagerness to help. These characteristics are what allow Othello's jealousy to mount as Iago manipulates Desdemona also increases the plausibility of the plot because her open nature and eagerness to help Cassio are what makes it so easy to incite jealousy in Othello. Iago is able to abuse these qualities and manipulates Othello's opinion of her from ' my wife

is fair, feeds well, loves company, is free of speech' to ' who thou hadst ne'er been born.

She is a symbol of purity, ironically embodying the ' white ewe' metaphor Iago uses at the beginning of the play. Her naivety, innocence and insistence that she would not commit adultery ' for the whole world' increase the dramatic effect of the tragedy. Despite this, Desdemona cannot be described as purely a dramatic device to highlight Othello's demise. Out of the three women, she undeniably holds the highest status and, as well as emphasizing the tragedy in the play, exists as a character in her own right. In Act 2 Scene 1, she affirms her individuality when she says ' I am not merry but I do beguile the thing I am by seeming otherwise'.

In this simple phrase she paints herself as a character of the same complexity and prominence as Iago; drawing parallels with the famous quote ' I am not what I am'. She also challenges the stereotypical Elizabethan view of woman in submissive roles when she holds her own in a battle of wit with Iago with ' O heavy ignorance, thou praise the worst best. But what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed? '. This image of a powerful woman would not have been commonplace at the time, making her authoritative disposition stand out to an audience and asserting Desdemona as a strong character in her own right. Emilia and Iago's relationship is volatile and shows no mutual respect, a complete contrast to the loving nature of Othello and Desdemona as a couple. Iago refers to Emilia as a ' foolish wife' and the couple are constantly ' chiding'.

Their interactions could be interpreted in two different ways, one as a flirty argumentative style of speech, the other as real maliciousness. Either way, their relationship is used as a device to enhance the purity and intimacy in Othello and Desdemona's marriage in contrast. Shakespeare uses this to further emphasise the Othello's breakdown and the eventual tragedy as their relationship seemed so perfect. Emilia is also used a device to offset Desdemona's naivety and innocence which acts to further the dramatic effect of her eventual death. This can be seen in Emilia's vulgar and animalistic presentation of men, ' they're all but stomachs, and we all but food: they eat us hungrily, and when they are full they belch us', disparaging Desdemona's delicate language and imagery when she speaks of Othello's ' honours and his valiant parts'.

However, it could be argued that Emilia does hold power as she manages to help convince Desdemona to reconsider her views on men as she concedes ' nay, we must think men are not gods'. Her speech towards her husband, such as ' ha? ', would probably be seen as out of her place in context and therefore Emilia as a character could have been used by Shakespeare to challenge the stereotype of females as submissive. On the other hand, despite Emilia's allusion of power and feminism, she concedes to the husband she ' chides' when Desdemona asks after her handkerchief and Emilia, on Iago's demands, says ' I know not, madam', revealing her use as a device to further her husband's manipulation. Bianca is a relatively small character in the play, but she is used for dramatic effect when she throws Desdemona's handkerchief at Cassio claiming that it is a ' minx token'. This

is the misinterpreted 'proof' that really pushes Othello over the edge and affirms his jealousy.

Bianca is also used as a device to discredit Cassio; Othello once respected him enough to place him as his second in command so we would assume it would take more than Iago's hinting for Othello to truly turn on him.

However, his hidden relationship with Bianca, the whore, harms his reputation, allowing Othello to be manipulated. In Bianca's case, she really is only used as a dramatic device to catalyse events, although it is arguable that she does assert power and her character in the argument between her and Cassio about him keeping a mistress or 'hobby-horse'. To conclude, the fact that women are mainly used to offset action and tragedy in the play does not, however, subtract from their importance or the power they hold as they act as catalysts without which the development of the plot would not be possible - surely a massive amount of power. It could be argued that even though the women are mostly seen through their relationships, they hold power in that the reputation and status of their men can almost be said to rely on them.

While Shakespeare does use women to heighten the dramatic effect of the plot, the same could be said for the men in the play such as Roderigo - a character used to show how easily Iago can manipulate people. As individual characters, these women hold their own within the play. All three challenge stereotypical Edwardian views of submissive women, however eventually they are dominated by their men. Desdemona is killed, Emilia becomes aware that her husband has used her in his malicious plot and Bianca has to keep her relationship a secret. Shakespeare could be making the point that

women, like these characters, however strong in nature are always overshadowed by men.