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“O treason of the blood!”: Gender and Race Issues in *Othello*

From the opening of *Othello*, Othello and Desdemona's interracial marriage is a cause of conflict. The marriage is constantly degraded by others, one particular instance being Rodrigo's slander that “an old black ram / is tuppung your white ewe” (1.1.90-91). Instead of overcoming the trials brought on by Iago's scheming, Othello and Desdemona allow themselves and their marriage to fall prey to doubt and jealousy. While Desdemona is only a pawn, unable to change Othello's mind no matter what she says or does, Othello is the one with the power to stop Iago's ploy to destroy him. However, he loses all rationality and allows himself to be duped. As the one “in charge” of his marriage, it is Othello's responsibility to thwart Iago's attempts, but he is blinded by his own ignorance, and thus, his marriage crumbles. Focusing on Othello's speech in 3.3.274-293, the differences in race and gender in Othello and Desdemona's marriage cause misunderstanding between them and lead to their destruction.

Of the two issues that contribute to Othello and Desdemona's misunderstanding of each other, race seems to be the less important one. While questioning Desdemona's supposed infidelity, Othello states:

Haply, for I am black

And have not those soft parts of conversation

That chamberers have, or for I am declined

Into the vale of years (3.3.279-282).

He is questioning if Desdemona's unfaithfulness is due to his being old and black. His doubts here are a result of the way others around him view his marriage. Such a doubt likely would not even be in his mind if others had not first brought it to his attention. His misgivings are unfounded, as Desdemona "never gives the slightest indication of regarding her husband as different because he is black and old" (Bevington 1151). Furthermore, it seems as if he is blaming his unrefined manners ("have not those soft parts of conversation / that chamberers have") on his being black. Again, this is likely a result of listening to those around him. A lower-class white man could easily practice manners that are unfavorable to the upper-class. His being black is not a direct cause for this, but he is unable to see that. Othello seems to think that his being black is the reason for his and Desdemona's cultural differences and misunderstandings. However, he could have been born white but in a different part of the world, and they still would not be on equal ground. Othello seems determined to make race a major issue in his and Desdemona's marriage. What he reveals in his speech but is unable to see is that their differences in gender provide the most strife in their relationship.

From the speech's opening line of "This fellow's of exceeding honesty," Othello brings the issue of gender to the forefront of his problems (3.3.274). A major reason Othello so readily believes Iago's accusations about Desdemona is that Iago is a man. If a woman came to Othello with such a tale, not only would he not believe her, but the woman would be severely punished for slandering Othello's bride. Othello thinks Iago "knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, / of human dealings" because Iago is a man (3.3.275-276). He puts stock into Iago's knowledge and opinions because he is supposedly rational and level-headed. Women, viewed as irrational creatures submissive to their sexual appetites, were not considered to be sources of truth and

knowledge. Othello believes Iago because he is a man, and thus reveals a disparity in the power structure of men and women within the play.

Further evidence of the power structure between men and women in *Othello* comes with Othello's statement, "If I do prove her haggard, / though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings, / I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind" (3.3.276-278). In these lines, Othello is likening Desdemona to an animal, a wild hawk to be exact. He is degrading her in viewing her as an animal, and an imprisoned one at that. Jesses are "straps fastened around the legs of a trained hawk" (Bevington 1179). Not only is Othello referencing his wife as an irrational animal, but he is saying that she is trained to behave in a certain way and controlled by him. He is subjecting her to his authority, but he is not the first man to do so. As an upper-class woman, Desdemona has been living up to certain expectations her entire life. In fact, "Desdemona marries Othello to get away from home, from 'guardage,' from the 'circumscription' and security which have shaped her life as an elite, white Venetian daughter" (Neely 305-306). Desdemona likely views Othello as the man who will free her from the bondage her white, upper-class upbringing as a woman has brought upon her. Unfortunately, despite his social and cultural differences, Othello falls right into the pattern of his adopted home.

Throughout this entire passage, Othello makes women, especially Desdemona, seem extremely superficial. Instead of talking to his wife about Iago's accusations, he wants to "prove her haggard" and "whistle her off" (3.3.276-278). With this, he is revealing how little faith he has in his wife. The fact that he questions if Desdemona no longer wants him because of his skin color, manners, and age makes Desdemona seem vain. Immediately implicating the physical qualities of himself as the reasons for her supposed infidelity serves to give him a way out. If

Desdemona only likes Othello's physical qualities, then it is not his fault if she cheats. After all, "All women have appetites; Desdemona is a woman; hence, Desdemona has appetites" (Bevington 1153). Othello has no reason, based upon Desdemona's actions, to question her faithfulness. However, "Iago successfully turns Othello's attention and his fears to Desdemona's sexuality" because of the preconceived notion of women during this period (Bartels 452). Othello cries, "Oh, curse of marriage, / that we can call these delicate creatures ours / and not their appetites!" (3.3.284-286). He is implying that Desdemona's sexual appetite is an entity entirely separate from her and out of her or his control. He is not only being degrading, but extremely sexist.

Othello closes his speech with yet another degradation of women. During his complaint, he says, "Yet, 'tis the plague of great ones; / prerogated are they less than the base" (3.3.289-290). Here, he is saying that it is his destiny as a "great man" to have his wife cheat on him. Apparently, "socially prominent men are especially prone to the common destiny of being cuckolded and to the public shame that goes with it" (Bevington 1179). Lesser men and regular citizens are not as susceptible to being cheated on. Despite the fact that he ruins his life by listening to Iago, Othello is still one of these "great ones." He automatically assumes that Desdemona will cheat on him because he is so important. The lack of respect he has for his wife is astonishing considering "Desdemona is devoted to Othello, admiring, and faithful. We believe her when she says that she does not even know what it means to be unfaithful" (Bevington 1151). Othello's belief that Desdemona has been unfaithful really has nothing to do with Desdemona at all. His insecurities stem from "an insufficient regard for himself" (Bevington 1154). Othello is using the idea of women's sexually disobedient natures and his own status to excuse his complete lack of faith in his wife.

What is truly tragic about *Othello* is that the ending is an unnecessary result of Iago's manipulation. At any moment, had Othello chosen to actually investigate Iago's claims, the damage could have been stopped. Instead Othello and Desdemona both fall victim, Othello as "the victim of racism, though he nobly refuses to deny his own culpability, and she is the victim of sexism, lapsing sadly into the stereotypical role of passive and silent sufferer" (Bevington 1155). Gender and race are the foremost of Othello and Desdemona's differences, and they lead to the misunderstandings that make it so easy for Iago to destroy their marriage. Simple communication could have thwarted Iago's efforts. In trying to prove Othello irrational, Iago actually makes him so. Gender and race differences are the conduits that lead to misunderstanding, but Othello's refusal to even attempt to understand prove that he is the irrational one in the relationship, despite what he thinks of Desdemona.

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