"Women and Men in Othello"

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Criticism about: Othello

[(essay date 1985) In the following essay, originally published in 1985, Neely contends that the central theme of Othello is marital love and that its primary conflict is between men and women.]

What should such a fool  
Do with so good a woman?

Othello, 5.2.234-35

Relations between love, sexuality, and marriage are under scrutiny in Othello, as in the comedies, problem plays, and Hamlet. In more extreme form than in the problem plays, we see here the idealization and degradation of sexuality, the disintegration of male authority and the loss of female power, the isolation of men and women, and the association of sexual consummation with death. The festive comedies conclude with the anticipation of fertile marriage beds. The problem comedies achieve their resolutions with the help of midpoint bedtricks. The marriage bed is at the very heart of the tragedy of Othello; offstage but dramatically the center of attention in the first scene and again in the first scene of the second act, it is literally and symbolically at the center of the last scene and is explicitly hidden from sight at the conclusion. Whether the marriage is consummated, when it is consummated, and what the significance of this consummation is for Othello and Desdemona have all been an important source of debate about the play. Throughout its critical history, Othello, like the other problem plays, has generated passionate and radically conflicting responses--responses that are invariably tied to the critics' emotional responses to the characters and to the gender relations in the play. Othello, Iago, and Desdemona have been loved and loathed, defended and attacked, judged and exonerated by critics just as they are by characters within the play.

"Almost damned in a fair wife" is Leslie Fiedler's alternate title for his chapter on Othello in The Stranger in Shakespeare. In it he asserts of the women in the play: "Three out of four, then, [are] weak, or treacherous, or both." Thus he seconds Iago's misogyny and broadens the attack on what Leavis has called "The sentimentalist's Othello," the traditional view of the play held by Coleridge, Bradley, Granville-Barker, Knight, Bayley, Gardner, and many others. These "Othello critics," as I shall call them, accept Othello at his own high estimate. They are enamored of his "heroic music," affirm his love, and, like him, are overwhelmed by Iago's diabolism, to which they devote much of their analysis. Like Othello, they do not always argue rationally or rigorously for their views and so are vulnerable to attacks on their romanticism or sentimentality. Reacting against these traditionalists, "Iago critics" (Eliot, Empson, Kirschbaum, Rossiter, and Mason, as well as Fiedler and Leavis) take their cues from Iago. Like him, they are attracted to Othello, unmoved by his rhetoric, and eager to
"set down the pegs that make this music." They attack Othello at his most vulnerable point, his love. They support their case by quoting Iago's estimates of Othello; they emphasize Iago's realism and "honesty" while priding themselves on their own. Their realism or cynicism gives them, with Iago, an apparent invulnerability. But, like "Othello critics," they share the bias and blindness of the character whose perspective they adopt. Most damagingly, both groups of critics, like both Othello and Iago, badly misunderstand and misrepresent the women in the play.

Iago critics implicitly demean Desdemona, for if Othello's character and love are called into question, then her love for him loses its justification and validity. Explicitly they have little to say about her. Othello critics idealize her along with the hero, but, like him, they have a tendency to see her as an object. The source of her sainthood seems a passivity verging on catatonia: "Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling. ... She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. ... Desdemona's suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores." Iago critics, finding the same trait, condemn Desdemona for it. "But the damage to her symbolic value is greater when we see her passively leaving everything to Heaven. She ought in a sense to have embodied Heaven, given us a human equivalent that would 'make sense' of Heaven. For this task she had the wrong sort of purity." When Desdemona is credited with activity, she is condemned for that, too; she is accused of being domineering, of using witchcraft, of rebelliousness, disobedience, wantonness. Although discussion of her has frequently been an afterthought to the analysis of the men, recently she has been the focus of a number of studies. Both Othello and Iago critics tend to see good versus evil as the play's central theme, Othello versus Iago as the play's central conflict, and hence, the major tragedies as its most important context.

A third group of "Iago-Othello critics," including Kenneth Burke, Arthur Kirsch, Stephen Greenblatt, Stanley Cavell, Edward Snow, and Richard Wheeler, elide the divisions between the first two groups and view the play from a perspective more like my own. They see Othello and Iago as closely identified with each other; they are "two parts of a single motive--related not as the halves of a sphere, but each implicit in the other." They find the source of the tragedy in Iago-Othello's anxieties regarding women, sexuality, and marriage--anxieties that are universal and generated by underlying social or psychological paradigms. Like Iago-Othello, these critics find the tragedy inevitable and locate its "cause" in an impersonal, implacable agency outside of the protagonists: for Burke, this "cause" is the "disequilibrium of monogamistic love"; for Kirsch, it is "the polarization of erotic love," with its psychological and theological roots; for Greenblatt, it is ambivalent Christian views of marital sexuality as chaste and adulterous; for Snow, it is "the male order of things," the patriarchal society that represses male sexuality and suppresses female sexuality at the behest of the superego; for Cavell, it is universal (male) fears of impotence and deflowering, and of mortality; for Wheeler, it is the conflict among male autonomy, female sexuality, and nurturing femininity. These critics do not ignore or sanctify Desdemona; nor do they condemn her explicitly. All emphasize her active, loving, passionate sensuality and extol her worth. An effect of their focus is, however, that
she, more than Iago, becomes the cause of Othello's destruction; it is her relaxed, frank, sexuality and the passionate response it arouses in Othello which generate the tragedy. These critics show how Desdemona's virtues catalyze Othello's sexual anxieties, but they fail to emphasize enough that she has the potential to provide a cure for them.

With this third group of critics, I argue that the play's central theme is love--specifically marital love--that its central conflict is between the men and the women, and that contexts as illuminating as the tragedies are its source, Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* and Shakespeare's preceding comedies. Within *Othello* it is Emilia who most explicitly speaks to this theme, recognizes this central conflict, and inherits from the heroines of comedy the role of potential mediator of it. She is dramatically and symbolically the play's fulcrum. It is as an Emilia critic, then, that I should like to approach the play, hoping to perceive it with something akin to her clear-sighted passion.

*Gli Hecatommithi* could have provided *Othello* with its theme and organizing principle as well as with its plot. The battle of the sexes in marriage is its central motif and dominates the frame, subject matter, and arrangement of the tales. In the introduction the company debates whether harmony can be achieved in marriage. Ponzio denies this, supporting his view with platitudes that Iago would relish: "Better bury a woman than marry her"; "For there to be peace between husband and wife, the husband must be deaf and the wife blind." Fabio, the group's leader, asserts instead that "the only rational love is that which has marriage as its goal, and that this is the quiet of true and wise lovers, coupled together, cooling their amorous flames with sage discourse and in legitimate union." *Othello* similarly presents marriage as either potentially strife-ridden or harmonious. In *Gli Hecatommithi* the debate continues in the tales, and in the Third Decade it is intensified by the inflammatory subject matter—the infidelity of husbands and wives. The seventh tale, the source of *Othello*, is a rebuttal of the sixth, in which a husband discovers his wife's infidelity and, as the company judges, "most prudently" (*prudentissimamente*) arranges to have her "accidentally" drowned. In the eighth tale, a contrast to the two preceding it, harmony supersedes warfare. A wife forgives her unfaithful husband and wins him back, behaving with a "prudence" (*la prudenza*) exactly opposite to the behavior of the husbands in tales six and seven. *Othello* similarly rings changes on the theme of male and female in a series of parallel and contrasting couples—Desdemona/Othello, Emilia/Iago, Bianca/Cassio—along with fantasy couples—Roderigo/Desdemona, Cassio/Desdemona, Othello/Emilia. Throughout the tales of the Third Decade it is most often the men who intensify the conflicts, practicing infidelity or taking revenge on wives they suspect of infidelity; the wives, even when wronged, often succeed in mending the relationships. The men in *Othello* similarly seek revenge; the women similarly seek to secure harmonious relationships but fail to do so.

Their predecessors in this task are the heroines of Shakespearean comedy, to which *Othello* shows pervasive and profound resemblances. Though it is almost always assumed that *Othello* is dominated by a tightly meshed plot, the play seems, like many of the comedies, loosely plotted, held together by theme. The conflicts introduced in the first act between Desdemona and her father and between Venetians
and Turks evaporate before they are under way exactly as do those between Hermia and Egeus in Midsummer Night's Dream and between Duke Frederick and Duke Senior in As You Like It. As in the comedies, these early plot developments are presented in a flat, compressed way; they seem almost an excuse to get the characters to the woods or to Cyprus where the play's real conflicts emerge. Iago plots the remainder of the play; but his scheme is slight, repetitive, and flawed. It has been found lacking in both motive (like Rosalind's plot in As You Like It) and goal (like Don John's plot in Much Ado about Nothing), and although the play's increasing intensity is undeniable, there is little actual plot development between the end of the first phase of the temptation scene (3.3.275) [All Othello citations are to the Arden Shakespeare edition, ed. M. R. Ridley] and the attempt on Cassio's life in act 5. Iago's destruction of Othello, like Rosalind's education of Orlando, is not merely linear. Both are continually starting over; they are repeated variations on opposite themes: Iago works to induce fantasy and Rosalind to dispel it. Neither entirely succeeds. Iago's plot, like those of the comedies, rests on coincidence and absurdity. The handkerchief is like the givens of the comedies--the fairy juice, the caskets, the disguises, the identical twins; it is trivial and ridiculous but, as I shall show, symbolically all-important. The play proceeds as much by a clash of attitudes, viewpoints, and sexes as by plot developments.

Structure, too, imitates that of the pastoral comedies in its movement from an urban center to an isolated retreat, with resultant intensity, freedom, breakdown, and interaction among disparate characters. Though Othello refers to Cyprus as a "town of war," once the threats of Turks and the storm have lifted, it is instead Venus's isle, a place for celebration--relaxation, drinking, eating (dinner arrangements are a frequent topic of conversation here as in Arden), flirting, sleeping, lovemaking. In the comedies, the potential corruption of these activities is suggested in witty banter, songs, comic simile and metaphor; in Othello, this corruption becomes literal. The play is a terrifying completion of the comedies. In them, realism and romanticism, lust and desire, heterosexual and homosexual bonds, male and female power are held in precarious balance. The men's idealism, misogyny, foolishness, and anxiety are mocked, transformed, and dispelled--"laugh[ed] to scorn" (As You Like It, 4.2.19)--by disguises and mock deaths, by parodied or aborted nuptials, by delayed or deceitful consummations. The women, through their "high and plenteous wit and invention" (Othello, 4.1.185), transform the men from foolish lovers into--we trust--sensible husbands, and at the end submit to their control. Although "The cuckoo then, on every tree, / Mocks married men," (Love's Labor's Lost, 5.2.896-97), the mockery grounds love without seriously threatening it. The comedies' relaxed incorporation of marital sexuality is evident in their endings, which look forward to fruitful, harmonious marital consummation--in the fairy-blessed beds of the Midsummer Night's Dream couples; the rewon beds of Bassanio and Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa in Merchant of Venice; the "well-deserved bed" of Silvius and the rest in As You Like It. But in Othello, the marriage has taken place before the play begins, and its consummation may already be under way, imaged by Iago as a theft, a violent attack. In the play, women's wit is constrained, their power over men is lost, and the men are transformed downward--"to be now and now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and
presently a beast" (2.3.296-97). The men's profound anxieties and murderous fantasies cannot be restrained by the women's affection, wit, and shrewishness. The play ends as it began, in a world of men--political, loveless, undomesticated.

The men in Othello extend and darken the anxieties of the comedy heroes. They are, in Emilia's words, "murderous coxcombs" (5.2.234). Three out of the five attempt murder; five out of the five are foolish and vain. Roderigo, most obviously a coxcomb, shows in exaggerated fashion the dangerous combination of romanticism and misogyny and the dissociation of love and sex that all the men share. He is a parody of the conventional Petrarchan lover: love is a "torment," death a "physician" (1.3.308-9), Desdemona "full of most blest condition" (2.1.247), and consummation of their relationship securely impossible. Yet he easily accepts Desdemona's supposed adultery and the necessity of Cassio's murder; his casual cynicism comes to outdo Iago's: "'Tis but a man gone" (5.1.10). The other men have similarly divided and possessive views of women. Brabantio shifts abruptly from protective affection for the chaste Desdemona--"of spirit / So still and quiet, that her motion / Blush'd at her self" (1.3.94-96)--to physical revulsion from the assertive sexuality revealed by her elopement--"I had rather to adopt a child than get it" (1.3.191). Cassio's divided view is more conventionally accommodated. He idealizes the "divine Desdemona," flirtingcourteously and cautiously with her and rejecting Iago's insinuations about her sexuality; this side of women is left to Bianca, who is a "monkey" and a "fitchew" and is used and degraded for it. Othello's conflict regarding women is more profound, and the other men's solutions are not open to him. Because of his marriage and his integrity, he cannot, like Roderigo, assert Desdemona's chastity and corruptibility simultaneously; like Cassio, direct his divided emotions toward different objects; or, like Brabantio, disown the problem.

Othello's shifts from the idealization of women to their degradation are "extravagant and wheeling" (1.1.136). Iago is the catalyst, but Othello makes his task easy. At the play's start, Othello's idealistic love, like that of the comedy heroes, needs some realistic grounding in the facts of sex. For Othello, sex is secondary and potentially either frivolous or debilitating and in conflict with his soldier's duty;

   no, when light-wing'd toys,

And feather'd Cupid, foils with wanton dullness

My speculative and active instruments,

That my disports corrupt and taint my business,

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,

And all indign and base adversities

Make head against my reputation!

(1.3.268-74)

Marriage and consummation naturally pose a threat to this idealistic love. Othello's greeting on Cyprus suggests his preference for a perpetually unconsummated courtship:

   If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute,
That not another comfort, like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

(2.1.189-93)

In response Desdemona asserts instead quotidian joys:

The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should increase,
Even as our days do grow.

Perhaps she, like Rosalind or Viola or the ladies in Love's Labor's Lost, might have tempered Othello's idealism, his need for absolute, unchanging love. Instead, it is nudged by Iago into its antithesis—contempt for women, disgust at sexuality, terror of cuckoldry, the preference for literal death over metaphorical "death." The acceptance of cuckoldry and sexuality found in the comedies—"as horns are odious, they are necessary" (As You Like It, 3.3.49-50)—is impossible for Othello. Instead he turns Petrarchan imagery against Desdemona—"O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?" (Othello, 4.2.69)—praising and damning her simultaneously. His conflicts are resolved, his needs to idealize and degrade her to maintain their love intact are momentarily reconciled only when he kills her, performing a sacrifice which is also a murder.

Iago, though primarily the manipulator of these conflicts in the other men, is also the victim of his own. His cynical generalizations are, like those of Jaques, the parody and inverse of the romantics' claims; they are self-conscious, defensive, self-aggrandizing, and divorced from reality: "My muse labours / And thus she is deliver'd" (2.1.127-28). Like the other men, he accepts generalizations—especially generalizations about women—as true, provided they are "apt and of great credit" (2.1.282), "probable, and palpable to thinking" (1.2.76). Like the others, he is careful not to contaminate his fantasies about women with facts. Roderigo does not court Desdemona in person, Othello does not immediately confront Desdemona and Cassio with his suspicions, and Iago never tries to ascertain whether or not Emilia is unfaithful.

In fact—like Don John and Parolles—he has little contact with the women in the play. He is at ease in act 2 engaging Desdemona in witty banter, but he is subdued and almost speechless in act 4 when confronted with her misery and fidelity. Treating Emilia with casual contempt throughout, he is astounded by her exposure of him in the last scene. Like Brabantio, Iago assumes that "consequence" will "approve" his "dream" (2.3.58) and ignores evidence to the contrary.

Even protected as it is from reality, Iago's cynicism/misogyny has cracks just as Othello's idealism does. He has a grudging admiration for and envy of Desdemona's "blest condition," Othello's "constant, noble loving, nature" (2.1.289), and Cassio's "daily beauty" (5.1.19). He aspires to Cassio's job and Othello's "content" and tries to identify with their love for Desdemona—"now I do love her too" (2.1.286), although
this love is immediately subsumed under notions of lust and revenge. The tension between his theoretical misogyny and his awareness of Desdemona's particular virtue drives him to resolve the conflicts, to turn that virtue "into pitch" (2.3.351), just as his verses extravagantly praise the deserving woman the better to be able to diminish her. Othello's conflict has the opposite issue; he murders Desdemona to redeem her from degradation.

The women in <i>Othello</i> are not murderous, nor are they foolishly idealistic or anxiously cynical, as the men are. From the start they, like the comedy heroines, combine realism with romance, mockery with affection. Bianca comically reflects the qualities of the women as Roderigo does those of the men. The play associates her with the other two women by means of the overheard conversation about her which Othello takes to be about Desdemona and by means of her irate and essentially just response to Emilia's attack: "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you, that thus abuse me" (5.1.120-21). At this point, Iago tries to fabricate evidence against her, just as Othello, in the scene immediately following, fabricates a case against Desdemona. Bianca's active, open-eyed enduring affection is similar to that of the other women. She neither romanticizes love nor degrades sex. She sees Cassio's callousness but accepts it wryly--"'Tis very good, I must be circumstanc'd" (3.4.199). She mocks him to his face but not behind his back, as he does her. Her active pursuit of Cassio is in contrast to his indifference, to Roderigo's passivity, and to Othello's naiveté. Even when jealous, she continues to feel affection for Cassio, accusing him openly and demanding that he come to dinner on her terms. The play's humanization of her, much like, for example, that of the bourgeois characters at the end of <i>Love's Labor's Lost</i>, underlines the folly of the male characters (and critics) who see her as merely a whore.

Emilia articulates the balanced view that Bianca embodies--"and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge" (4.3.92-93). She, like other Shakespearean shrews, especially Beatrice and Paulina, combines sharp-tongued honesty with warm affection. Her views are midway between Desdemona's and Bianca's and between those of the women and those of the men. She rejects the identification with Bianca yet sympathizes with female promiscuity. She corrects Desdemona's occasional naiveté but defends her chastity. Although she comprehends male jealousy and espouses sexual equality, she seems remarkably free from jealousy herself. She wittily sees cuckoldry and marital affection as compatible: "Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?" (4.3.74-75). She understands, but tolerates, male fancy; the dangers of such tolerance become evident in this play as they never do in the comedies.

Desdemona's and Emilia's contrasting viewpoints in the willow scene have led critics to think of them as opposites, but both are strong, realistic, and compliant. When we first see them together, they encourage and participate in Iago's misogynist banter but reject his stereotypes. Desdemona here defends Emilia from Iago's insults just as Emilia will ultimately defend Desdemona from Othello's calumny. While Desdemona is no shrew (though she might be said to approach one in the matter of Cassio's reinstatement), her love is everywhere tempered by realism and wit like that of the comedy heroines. During courtship she hides, as they did, behind a sort of disguise, in
this case not male dress, but a mask of docility and indifference which conceals her passion from both her father and Othello. Like Iago's docile and deserving woman she is one that could "think, and ne'er disclose her mind, / See suitors following, and not look behind" (2.1.156-57). Eventually, though, she takes the lead in the courtship as the heroines do; she finds an excuse to be alone with Othello, mocks him by speaking of him "dispraisingly" (3.3.73), and traps him into a proposal using indirection not unlike Rosalind's with Orlando.

After marriage, as during courtship, Desdemona's love tempers romance with realism, obedience with self-assertion. She is indifferent to Cassio's elaborate compliments (2.1.87ff.). She rejects Othello's desire to stop time, instead emphasizing love's growth. Her healthy, casual acceptance of sexuality is evident in her banter with Iago and with the clown, in her affirmation that she "did love the Moor, to live with him" (1.3.248), and in her refusal to postpone consummation of "the rites for which I love him" (1.3.257). She will not allow herself to be idealized; nor will she romanticize Othello. She had spoken "dispraisingly" of him during courtship, and she mocks him gently after marriage:

Tell me, Othello: I wonder in my soul,
What you could ask me, that I should deny?
Or stand so mammering on?
Shall I deny you? no, farewell, my lord.
She reminds herself, in an emphatically short line:
    nay, we must think
Men are not gods;
Nor of them look for such observances
As fits the bridal.

(3.4.145-48)

Her concise statement about her love reveals its balance and health:
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours, and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

(1.3.252-54)

She loves Othello for his body and mind, for his reputation and actions; she consecrates herself to him spiritually and practically.

Desdemona's spirit, clarity, and realism do not desert her entirely in the latter half of the play as many critics and performances imply. Her inability to defend herself is partly the result of Othello's refusal to voice his suspicions directly. When he does so in the brothel scene, she persistently questions him to discover exactly what he is accusing her of and defends herself as "stoutly" (3.1.45) as she had earlier defended Cassio:

If to preserve this vessel for my lord
From any hated foul unlawful touch,
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

(4.2.85-87)

Her naiveté and docility in the willow scene are partly a result of her confusion and fear, but perhaps also partly a protective facade behind which she waits, as she did during courtship, while determining the most appropriate and fruitful reaction to Othello's rage. The conversation and the song with its alternate last verses explore alternate responses to male perfidy--acceptance "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve"--or retaliation "If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men" (4.3.51-56). Emilia supports retaliation--"The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (l. 103)--though, like Bianca, she practices acceptance. Desdemona's final couplet suggests that she is groping for a third response, one that is midway between "grace" and "revenge," one that would be more active than acceptance yet more loving than retaliation:

God me such usage send,
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!

(4.3.104-05)

The lines are a reply to Emilia and a transformation of an earlier couplet of Iago's: "fairness and wit / The one's for use, the other using it" (2.1.129-30). Desdemona will put fairness and wit to use in a sense that includes and goes beyond the sexual one, acknowledging and using "bad" to heal it. Her earlier command to have the wedding sheets put on her bed seems one expression of this positive usage. Just before her death, as earlier in the handkerchief and brothel scenes, Desdemona strives to "mend" Othello's debased view of her, transforming the "sins" he accuses her of into "loves I bear to you"; a testimony to her pure, active, humble, fertile affections. But Othello recorrupts them: "And for that thou diest" (5.2.40-41).

The men's sense of identity and worth is dependent not only on their relations with women but on their bonds with other men who guarantee their honor and reputation. Vanity, rivalry, and dependence characterize the relations among all the men in the play. Jaques's portrait of the soldier aptly sums up traits which they share: "Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, / Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the canon's mouth" (2.7.149-52), traits which are those of coxcombs but grow murderous here. Cassio, of course, explicitly voices the men's concern with "the bubble reputation" and reveals how central their position and image are to their sense of identity: "I ha' lost my reputation! I ha' lost the immortal part, sir, of myself, and what remains is bestial" (2.3.255). This identity is highly vulnerable because the men view reputation as detachable, external; it is a matter of rank or title, something to be conferred--or removed--by other men. Hence Iago continues to care about the rank of lieutenant in spite of his continuing intimacy with Othello. Cassio equally relishes his title; "The lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient," he boasts (2.3.103). Othello must fire Cassio for appearances' sake and because Montano "is of great fame in Cyprus" (3.1.46). Othello's dependence on others' "rich opinion" (2.3.286) creates conflict in his love; "feather'd
Cupid" potentially threatens "reputation" in the first act, and later he finds the scorn due the cuckold almost as difficult to bear as the loss of Desdemona.

Although they are neither "bearded like a pard" nor "full of strange oaths," the men in this play, in their vanity, desire the swaggering manliness which such characteristics conjure up. Iago successfully plays on the others' nervousness about this "manliness," driving them to acts of "malicious bravery" (1.1.100). He jovially calls them "man" while questioning their manhood or urging new proofs of it. He goads Cassio into "manly" drunkenness and good fellowship--"What, man, 'tis a night of revels, the gallants desire it" (2.3.39). He urges Othello, "Good sir, be a man" (4.1.65). He flatters Roderigo's manly pride: "if thou hast that within thee indeed, which I have greater reason to believe now than ever, I mean purpose, courage, and valour, this night show it" (4.2.213-16). His suggestive battle cries to Roderigo imply a connection that all the men assume between sexual and martial prowess: "Wear thy good rapier bare, and put it home. ... fix most firm thy resolution" (5.1.2, 5); perhaps the gull's melodramatic attack on Cassio is "satisfying" even beyond Iago's "reasons," compensating him for his lack of sexual success. Inversely, cuckoldry is seen by Othello as invalidating his military glories; only the murder of Desdemona and his own suicide restore his pride in his "occupation."

Since the reputation and manliness which the men covet is achieved in competition with others, all the men are "jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel." Iago's success derives largely from his ability to manipulate male rivalries, verifying his friendship with each man by shared contempt toward another. In this way, he feeds the men's need for self-esteem, insures their bond with him, and exacerbates their potential rivalries with each other. He enrages Brabantio by claiming that his friend has "robbed" his daughter. He gulls Roderigo by demeaning Othello and urging that they have common cause against him: "my cause is hearted, thine has no less reason, let us be communicative in our revenge against him: if thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, and me a sport" (1.3.366-69). He almost offhandedly belittles Othello to Cassio, Cassio to Montano, Othello to Lodovico. His entrapment of Othello begins by insinuating not Desdemona's unfaithfulness but Othello's cuckoldry, his loss of "good name." This cuckoldry triply threatens Othello: with the loss of Desdemona's love; with the supremacy of Cassio, his lieutenant, over him; and with the loss of his reputation and the scorn of other men.

Iago offers to compensate for these losses with his own love--to replace Othello's other bonds with their friendship. Iago's attack is set up when Othello demands that Iago prove his love by complying with his general's wishes (he has just been threatened by Desdemona's seeming to put similar pressure on him): "If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought" (3.3.119-20). It concludes with Othello's attempt to replace his love for Desdemona with a vow of vengeance and a (coerced) bond with Iago, through which it seems he can restore his heroism and control by regaining the love and dependence he fears he has lost:

Iago:

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The excellency of his wit, hand, heart,
To wrong'd Othello's service: let him command,
And to obey him shall be in me remorse,
What bloody work so ever.

Othello:

I greet thy love;
Not with vain thanks, but with acceptance bounteous.

Iago's feigned love gives him power which Desdemona's genuine love cannot
counteract; he destroys his superior by destroying Othello's belief in his own
superiority and the bonds which confirm that superiority. Nowhere is his power and
its roots in Othello's fear of inferiority to other men more ruthlessly and painfully
demonstrated than when Iago engineers Othello's eavesdropping of his and Cassio's
mockery of Bianca; here, Othello's wounded vanity, obsessive jealousy, and
competitive concern for reputation and manliness coalesce in his terse asides with
their sexual-martial double entendres:

Do you triumph, Roman, do you triumph?
So, so, so, so; laugh that wins.
Ha' you scor'd me? Well.
I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw't to.

Iago likewise gains power by imposing on the play, through his bawdy, an image of
heterosexuality which, like male bonds, is seen as competitive and violent. Sexuality
here is not merely represented as an act of male assertion, as in Much Ado, or as
painful debilitation, as in All's Well That Ends Well, but as a violent, bestial
overpowering of the woman by the man which degrades both: "an old black ram / Is
tupping your white ewe," "you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse," "he hath boarded a land carrack"; Desdemona is in the "gross clasps of a lascivious
Moor" (1.1.88-89; 110-11; 2.2.50; 1.1.126). This vision of sexuality comes to replace
the tender, hallowed passion of Desdemona for Othello, her desire to participate in
"the rites for which I love him" (1.3.257), as Othello imagines that Cassio "lie[s] with
her, lie[s] on her" (4.1.38), "pluck[s] up kisses by the roots" (3.3.429). The inevitable
culmination of this fantasy occurs when Othello clasps, covers, and stifles
Desdemona--"Down, strumpet. ... Nay and you strive" (5.2.80,82), silencing her "even
in the bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.203)--and then kills himself.

Although the men's aggression destroys the women, their attempts at heroic violence
against each other do not completely succeed. Othello vows to kill Cassio but never
does, and Roderigo's murder attempt on Cassio fails. It takes Cassio and Iago together
to kill poor Roderigo, and Othello cannot kill Iago. The cowardice, clumsiness, and
insecurity that belie male pretensions to valor are manifested comically--as in the
Twelfth Night duel or in the gulling of Parolles--in the hesitation of Lodovico and Gratiano to answer Roderigo's and Cassio's cries for help: "Two or three groans; it is a heavy night, / These may be counterfeits, let's think 't unsafe / To come into the cry without more help" (5.1.42-45). Even after Iago's entrance, they still hang back, ascertaining his identity (51) but ignoring his cry (thus allowing him to murder Roderigo), introducing themselves (67), discovering Cassio's identity (70), and finally coming to his side after Bianca, who has just entered (75). They still offer no assistance but only perfunctory sympathy and an anticlimactic explanation: "I am sorry to find you thus, I have been to seek you" (81).

Male friendship, like male courage, is in this play sadly deteriorated from the Renaissance ideal. In romance and comedy, the world of male friendship in which the work opens (see, for example, the Arcadia, Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Merchant of Venice, Love's Labor's Lost) is disrupted and transcended by romantic love. In the problem comedies, male friendship is already corrupted as friends exploit and betray each other. As Othello begins, romantic love already dominates, but friendship is reasserted in perverted form. Iago's hypocritical friendship for all of the men, which aims to gratify his own will and gain power over them, is the model for male friendship in the play. Brabantio's "love" for Othello evaporates when his friend marries his daughter. Roderigo intends to use Iago though he is worse used by him. Othello has no hesitation in cashiering Cassio and ordering his death. The men's vanity and rivalry, their preoccupation with rank and reputation, and their cowardice render them as incapable of friendship as they are of love.

The women, in contrast, are indifferent to reputation and partially free of vanity, jealousy, and competitiveness. 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. 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" (5.2.222-23). If Cassio's description of Bianca corresponds at all to fact, she too ignores reputation, comically, to pursue him--"she haunts me in every place ... she falls thus about my neck; ... so hangs, and lolls, and weeps upon me" (4.1.131-36)--and we see her brave the confusion of the night and the ugliness of Iago's insinuations to come to Cassio's side when he is wounded. Bianca's jealousy is also in contrast to the men's; instead of corroding within, it is quickly vented and dissipates, leaving her affection for Cassio essentially unchanged. Furthermore, she makes no effort to discover her rival, to obtain "proof," or to get revenge. Likewise Emilia, though expert at noting and analyzing jealousy, seems untouched by it herself. Even her argument for the single standard is good-natured; it contains little hatred of men and no personal animosity toward Iago.

Desdemona is neither jealous nor envious nor suspicious. She is not suspicious or possessive about Othello's job, his intimacy with Iago, or his "love" for Cassio, but supports all three. She seems entirely lacking in the sense of class, race, rank, and hierarchy that concerns the men and is shared by Emilia, who refuses to be identified with Bianca. She treats her father, the Duke, Othello, Cassio, Iago, Emilia, even the clown, with precisely the same combination of politeness, generosity, openness, and firmness. Emilia's and Desdemona's lack of competitiveness, jealousy, and class consciousness facilitates their growing intimacy, which culminates in the willow
scene. The scene, sandwiched between two exchanges of Iago and Roderigo, sharply contrasts the genuine intimacy of the women with the hypocritical friendship of the men, while underlining the women's isolation and powerlessness. Emilia's concern for Desdemona is real, and her advice well meant, whereas Iago's concern for Roderigo is feigned, his advice deadly—"whether he kill Cassio, / Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, / Every way makes my game" (5.1.12-14). Roderigo accepts Iago's "satisfying reasons," finding them sufficient to justify murder; Desdemona rejects Emilia's reasonable justification of wives' adultery without rejecting the concern that prompts her to offer it. In the willow scene sympathy stretches from Emilia and Desdemona to include Barbary and the protagonist of the song--all victims of male perfidy; in the Roderigo/Iago scenes, enmity reaches Cassio. In this play romantic love is destroyed by the semblance of male friendship, which itself soon disintegrates. Meanwhile, friendship between women is established and dominates the play's final scene. Othello chooses Iago's friendship over Desdemona's love temporarily and unwittingly; Emilia's choice of Desdemona over Iago is voluntary and final. Though the stakes here are higher, the friendship of Desdemona and Emilia is reminiscent of the generous, witty female friendship in the comedies, where women share their friends' hardships (Rosalind and Celia), vigorously defend their honor (Beatrice and Hero), support their strategems (Portia and Nerissa), and sympathize with and aid even their rivals (Julia and Sylvia, Viola and Olivia, Helen and Diana, Mariana and Isabella). But in Othello, without the aid of disguise, bedtricks, or mock deaths, the women cannot protect each other from male animosity.

Because of the men's vanity, competitiveness, and concern for honor and reputation, when they do act, they try to exonerate themselves, persistently placing blame for their actions outside themselves. Even Cassio, while abusing himself for his drunkenness, comes to personify that drunkenness as a "devil," something which invades him. Roderigo blames Iago for his failure to prosper: "Iago hurt [me]. Iago set [me] on" (5.2.329-30). Iago, at the last, instead of boasting about the execution of his grand design (as, for example, Satan does in Paradise Lost), tries to shift responsibility for it elsewhere--to Bianca, to Emilia, and finally, even after the facts are known, to Othello: "I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true" (5.2.177-78). Othello's longing for passivity and his denial of responsibility are intertwined throughout the play. He both sees himself as passive and desires passivity. His narrative history before the senate, the basis for our original impression of the heroic Othello, describes, when closely examined, what he has suffered rather than what he has done; he speaks of "moving accidents by flood and field; / Of hair-breadth scapes 'i th' imminent deadly breach; / Of being taken by the insolent foe; / And sold to slavery, and my redemption hence" (1.3.135-38), and of his subsequent enslavement by Desdemona, whom he entertained with similar tales, for example, "of some distressed stroke / That my youth suffer'd" (1.3.157-58). Pity is indeed the appropriate response to his tale. His farewell to arms is, curiously, a farewell to "content," to "the tranquil mind" (3.3.354), and to the instruments of war; it is they who are seen as active and heroic, not himself. His vow of revenge, likening him to the "compulsive course" of the "Pontic sea," reveals the longing for external control and validation which underlies the heroic stance. In a parallel passage after his error is revealed, he again wants to be swept along by a current: "Blow me about in
winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!” (5.2.280-81), to be consumed by hell-fire rather than by desire. Two of his significant actions in the play--the cashiering of Cassio and the murder of Desdemona--are, in a sense, "compulsive," achieved, as he himself notes, only when passion "Assays to lead the way" (2.3.198), and he feels out of control or seeks a false sense of being under the control of an impersonal "cause." Even at his suicide, when he is in control, he sees himself as "you" rather than "I," object rather than actor, as "being wrought, / Perplex'd in the extreme ... one whose subdued eyes, ... Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinal gum" (5.2.246-51). In the anecdote that accompanies his suicide, Othello is actor and acted upon, hero and victim, and his action is again violent and enraged. But it is also premeditated--and gives him, at last, the command over himself he has not achieved throughout.

Desdemona's self-recriminations must be seen in the light of Othello's evasions. Critics have found them puzzling, excessive, intolerable, even neurotic, perhaps they are all of these. But her unwarranted self-accusations--"beshrew me much, Emilia, / I was (unhandsome warrior as I am) / Arraigning his unkindness with my soul; / But now I find I had suborn'd the witness, / And he's indited falsely" (3.4.148-52)--and her false assumption of responsibility for her death--"Nobody, I myself, farewell" (5.2.125) provide the sharpest possible contrast to the men's excuses. Her last request, "Commend me to my kind lord," not only conveys her forgiveness but is one final active effort to restore their mutual love. She is not, however, a willing victim and does not sacrifice herself to Othello, although she does not attribute guilt to him either. She defends her innocence and pleads for her life; but he murders her anyway.

Desdemona's cryptic lines after she is apparently dead give to her actual death some of the functions and the feel of Shakespearean mock deaths. Like the women who stage them, she defends her innocence--"A guiltless death I die" (5.2.123)--assumes responsibility for the death, and seeks to transform Othello into a "kind lord." When the audience finds that the women it has thought dead remains alive, the poignant, momentary impression that this may be a mock death intensifies the horror of the scene. Desdemona's refusal to blame and hurt Othello is at the heart of her loving virtue. Hero, Helen, and Hermione likewise do not blame their detractors directly. But this virtue coalesces in dangerous ways with Othello's need to blame and hurt her.

From the beginning, Desdemona has viewed love as risk and challenge. She has violently uprooted herself from her father's protection and the conventional expectations of Venetian society, whereas Othello has put himself into "circumscription and confine" for her. She has initiated while Othello has responded. She is neither the "rose" or "chrysolite" of Petrarchan convention seen by Othello nor the saint extolled by critics. She sets the stage for her wooing by an extraordinarily active listening, which Othello naturally notices and describes; she would "with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse" (1.3.149-50). She engenders his love by her own: "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (ll. 168-69); she proposes and elopes. She is the one who challenges her father directly, who determines to go to Cyprus. She moves after marriage to bring the lovers' idiom down to earth, using all of her "plenteous wit and invention" at their
reunion and in the discussion of Cassio. All the characters in the play make mention of her energizing power. Cassio, hyperbolically, attributes to her the ability to influence recalcitrant nature:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
The gutter'd rocks, and congregated sands,
Traitors ensteep'd, to clog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty, do omit
Their common natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.

(2.1.68-73)

Othello is awed by her power to move man and beast--"She might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks. ... O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear" (4.1.180-81, 184-85)--testifying, late in the play, to his ineradicable love for her. Iago, in soliloquy, attributes to her unlimited power over Othello--"she may make, unmake, do what she list" (2.3.337). And Desdemona herself, vowing support for Cassio, reveals her sense of her own persistance and controlling force:
If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it
To the last article.

(3.1.21-22)

But Desdemona's energy, assertiveness, and power are made possible by Othello's loving response to her, just as his subduing of himself to her, his "garner[ing] up" (4.2.58) of his heart is engendered by her love for him. Each has "thrive[d]" (1.3.25) in the apparent security of their mutual love, but their joyous subduing of themselves to each other leaves them vulnerable. With that certainty lost, with their responses to each other mistrusted, Othello is plunged into chaos and Desdemona into helplessness. In this crisis, he seeks to be "unhoused" again, and she refuses to acknowledge the loss of her new home: "Commend me to my kind lord" (5.2.126).

All of the women, in spite of their affection, good sense, and energy, fail to transform or to be reconciled with the men. The sexes, so sharply differentiated in the play, badly misunderstand each other. The men, as we have seen, persistently misconceive the women; the women fatally overestimate the men. Each sex, trapped in its own values and attitudes, misjudges the other. Iago acts on the hypothesis that women, on the one hand, share his concern with reputation and propriety ("Be wise, and get you home" [5.2.224], he orders Emilia) and, on the other, enact his salacious fantasies. Othello assumes, with Iago's prompting, that just as he is the stereotypical soldier, foreigner, older husband, so Desdemona will be the stereotypical mistress, Venetian, young bride. He responds to Iago's claim to knowledge about Desdemona--"knowing what I am, I know what she shall be"--with comic enthusiasm: "O thou art wise, 'tis certain" (4.1.73-74). Likewise the women attribute their own qualities to the men. Desdemona projects her lack of jealousy onto Othello. Emilia attributes to Iago her own capacity for empathy: "I know it grieves my husband, / As if the case were
his" (3.3.3-4). Even Bianca, because she does not view herself as a whore in her relationship with Cassio, is surprised that he should treat her as one. Hence, although the women recognize the foolishness of the men's fancies, they are all too tolerant of them. Emilia steals the handkerchief for the sake of Iago's "fantasy" (3.3.303) and thus assures the success of his plot. Desdemona's salutation to Othello in act 3 is lamentably prophetic--"Be it as your fancies teach you, / What e'er you be, I am obedient" (3.3.89-90). He leaves her to be instructed in her whoredom.

The lost handkerchief becomes the emblem of the women's power and its loss. Both Othello's original description of the handkerchief and its part in the plot reveal that it is a symbol of women's loving, civilizing, sexual power. It has passed from female sibyl to female "charmer" to Othello's mother to Desdemona. Othello is merely a necessary intermediary between his mother and his wife--"She dying, gave it me, / And bid me, when my fate would have me wive, / To give it her" (3.4.61-63). Its creator, the sibyl, who "In her prophetic fury sew'd the work," and its next owner, the Egyptian charmer who "could almost read / The thoughts of people," reveal the source of its power in women's passionate intuitive knowledge. This knowledge, it seems, enables them to use and control sexuality. The middle ground that women find between lust and abstinence (as the men in the play cannot do) is suggested in the description of the process by which the handkerchief is made. The worms that did "breed" the silk, emblems of death, sexuality, and procreation, are "hallow'd." The thread they spin vitally and naturally from themselves is artificially improved, dyed in "mummy" which is "conserve[d] from maiden's hearts." The handkerchief then represents marital chastity--sexuality transformed by loving fidelity. Its function is to chasten and control men's love and desire:

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   she told her, while she kept it
   'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
   Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,
   Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
   Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt
   After new fancies.
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(ll. 56-61)

It represents women's ability to moderate men's erratic (and erotic) "fancies," to "subdue" their promiscuity (assumed to be the norm under the double standard outlined by Emilia), and perhaps, by extension, their vanity, romanticism, jealousy, and rage as well. The handkerchief is the symbol of Desdemona's loving power over Othello:

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   Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul,
   But I do love, thee, and when I love thee not,
   Chaos is come again.
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(3.3.91-93)
The handkerchief is lost, literally and symbolically, not because of the failure of Desdemona's love, but because of Othello's loss of faith in that love. Once lost, the female power it symbolizes is degraded and constrained, and comedy gives way to tragedy.

After the handkerchief's original loss, all of the characters, men and women alike, misuse its power and misinterpret its symbolism, marking the disruption of all the love relationships in the play. The abuse begins when Othello pushes it aside, rejecting Desdemona's loving attempt to heal the pain on his forehead, and Emilia picks it up to give it to Iago, thereby making herself subservient to him and placing her loyalty to her husband above affection for Desdemona. Her silence about its whereabouts confirms her choice. Shakespeare's alteration of his source--removing Iago from an active role in the theft of the handkerchief and dramatizing its loss in these particular circumstances--emphasizes the handkerchief's symbolism and the active role played by Desdemona and Emilia in the misunderstandings that follow from its loss. In Iago's hands, its function is reversed; it is used to confirm his power over Emilia and Othello and to induce in Othello loathing for Desdemona. Iago's first mention of it incites Othello to reject love and embrace vengeance (3.3.441-86). Now the hero, under Iago's tutelage, proceeds to reinterpret the handkerchief as his love token--a pledge of his love and possession of Desdemona and of her sexual fidelity--"She is protectress of her honour too, / May she give that?" (4.1.14-15). Hence its loss provides "proof" of his suspicions. The reinterpretation continues in his altered description of its history in the last act. As he uses it to support his "cause" against Desdemona, it becomes "the recognizance and pledge of love / Which I first gave her ... an antique token / My father gave my mother" (5.2.215-18; italics mine). It is now a symbol of the male control and love which Desdemona has betrayed; hence she must be punished--"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6).

Desdemona, too, alters her view of the handkerchief. Instinctively using it to cure Othello's pain, she almost succeeds. She "loves" the handkerchief (3.3.297) and recognizes the danger of its loss. But when pressed by Othello, she rejects its significance--"Then would to God that I had never seen it!" (3.4.75). Her rejection reflects the failure of her power. In Desdemona's earlier discussion of Cassio she was in control; now her persistence is foolish and provokes Othello's rage. Even in the early part of this scene, Desdemona deftly parries and "mends" Othello's ugly insinuations, turning his implied sexual vices into passionate virtues:

Othello:
This hand is moist, my lady.
Desdemona:
It yet has felt no age, nor known no sorrow.
...

Othello:
For here's a young and sweating devil here,
That commonly rebels: 'tis a good hand,
A frank one.

Desdemona:
You may indeed say so,
For 'twas that hand that gave away my heart.

(3.4.32-41)

But after the tale of the handkerchief she loses the initiative. She tries to regain it by--just barely--lying, and by changing the subject. But the attempt to calm and heal Othello fails. Her lie, like Ophelia's similarly well-intentioned lie to Hamlet, is generated by her love but signals the loss of her maiden's power and innocence; it confirms--Othello believes--his notions about female depravity, as Ophelia's lie confirms Hamlet's similar views. Both women, rejected by their lovers, do not regain the initiative in the relationship.

The handkerchief next creates conflict in the Iago/Emilia and Cassio/Bianca relationships. Both men use it, as Othello has done, to consolidate their power over women. When Emilia regrets its theft, Iago snatches it from her and dismisses her, "Be not you known on 't" (3.3.324). Cassio similarly gives orders to Bianca regarding it and dismisses her (3.4.188-89). She, though jealous, agrees to copy the work; her willingness to be "circumstanc'd" (l. 200) is a flaw which all the women share. Later, however, she returns the handkerchief in a scene parallel and in contrast to that when the handkerchief was lost. Bianca, like Othello, is jealous. She flings down the handkerchief as he pushed it aside, and it lies on the stage ignored by the couple, who go off to a possible reconciliation. But Bianca's refusal to be used by the handkerchief or by Cassio leads to a truce and a supper engagement, whereas Othello's refusal to be healed by it opens the breach in his relationship with Desdemona that culminates in her murder.

Eventually the handkerchief's original function is reestablished; it becomes the vehicle through which civilizing control is returned to the women. The reference to it by Othello in the last scene enlightens Emilia; it ends Iago's domination of her, engenders her accusations of Othello and Iago, and enables her to prove Desdemona's faithful "amiable" love. Othello is once again "subdue[d]" to this love. Emilia, stealing the handkerchief, is catalyst for the play's crisis; revealing its theft, she is catalyst for the play's denouement.

Her reiteration of "husband" and "mistress" in the last scene emphasizes the play's central division and the "divided duty" of Emilia. When Iago's villainy is made known, she shifts her allegiance unhesitatingly. Instead of tolerating both Iago's "fancy" and Desdemona's virtue, she denounces the one and affirms the other. She questions Iago's manliness: "Disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man: / He said thou told'st him that his wife was false, / I know thou didst not, thou art not such a villain" (5.2.173-75). Then she rejects the wifely virtues of silence, obedience, and prudence that are demanded of her, "unhousing" herself:

I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak:

.....
'Tis proper I obey him, but not now:
Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home.
Her epithet just before she is stabbed appropriately refers to all the men in the play:
Iago, to whose taunts it is a response; Othello, who responds to it; and Cassio,
Roderigo, and Brabantio as well:
O murderous coxcomb! what should such a fool
Do with so good a woman?

(ll. 234-35)

Emilia, another "good woman," dies without self-justifications or calls for revenge;
instead she testifies to Desdemona's innocence and love just as her mistress had done
at her own death. Her request to be laid by her mistress, her reiteration of the willow
song, and her own attempts to "by bad mend" complete her identification with
Desdemona.

Emilia's story has utterly destroyed Iago's bond with Othello and foiled his attempt to
"make up [his] will," (1.3.393), to complete himself by compensating for his own
misshapenness through the stories that allow him to shape others. He and his fantasies
are repudiated by Roderigo, by Othello, and by Emilia. Her refusal of obedience
destroys Iago's plot and refutes his philosophy, which requires that she act in her own
self-interest. Iago's final, Othello-like attempt to deny his wife's betrayal is to call her
"villainous whore" and stab her, thus validating her confession and her epitaph for
him. But this act, like all of the other events of the night, "fordoes" Iago instead of
"mak[ing]" him (5.1.128). He has not eradicated Othello's love for Desdemona or
turned her virtue into pitch. The deaths of Roderigo, Desdemona, Emilia, and Othello
destroy the power over others which is the source of his self-engendering and identity.
His final silence--"Demand me nothing, what you know, you know, / From this time
forth I never will speak word" (5.2.304-5)--is, for him, the equivalent of suicide.
Iago's silence, his imperviousness, his unmade-upness, his refusal to suffer, all
mitigate his scapegoat function throughout the last scene, emphasizing instead his role
as catalyst to Othello's tragedy. It is Othello's speech, his pain, his recreation of a self
to which we attend.

While the division between Iago and Emilia is absolute after he kills her, some
connections between Othello and Desdemona are reestablished in the last act.
Desdemona, as we have seen, continues to affirm their relationship up to the moment
of her death, and Othello in the last scene does move away from the men and toward
the women. Othello, like Desdemona and Emilia, dies in pain testifying to love,
whereas Iago lives, silent; Othello, like the women, stays to acknowledge at least
partial responsibility for his actions, while Iago flees, accepting none. But Othello
cannot abandon his masculine identity by asserting a new one: "That's he that was
Othello; here I am" (l. 285). Instead of applying Emilia's accusation to himself, he
stabs Iago; the two men are one in their desire to place guilt elsewhere and eliminate
its bearer. With Iago's exit, Othello turns his attention, characteristically, to his honor
and a suicide weapon. Emilia's death, though it reenacts Desdemona's, is a mere
parenthesis in his search, scarcely noticed by him. Although male bombast is virtually
silenced at the end of this play, as it is in the comedies--Iago will "never more speak word" (l. 305) and the terseness and precision of Roderigo's dying epithet for Iago ("O inhuman dog") are equaled in Cassio's epitaph for the dead Othello ("For he was great of heart")--Othello's rhetoric continues unchecked. Throughout the scene, he persists in seeing himself and Desdemona as ill-fated, "unlucky," as victims of Iago who has "ensnar'd" (l. 303) him. Desdemona is still imagined as the remote, passive, perfect object of romantic love. She is "cold, cold" as her "chastity" (ll. 276-77), associated with "monumental alabaster" (l. 5), with an "entire and perfect chrysolite" (l. 146), and with a "pearl" (l. 348). In his last speeches, his own brand of Iago's "motive-hunting," he strives to reconstitute his heroic reputation. He leaves the play exactly as he had entered it, affirming his services to the state (compare 1.2.17), confessing, asking for justice and judgment (compare 1.3.122-25), telling stories about his past, and putting his "unhoused free condition" into its ultimate "confine" for love of Desdemona. His suicide both punishes himself as an Iago-like "dog" and reasserts his identity as a decisive, just commander and a passionate lover of Desdemona: "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee, no way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (ll. 359-60). His love remains idealistic, anxious, self-justifying--consummated "no way" but in death.

Indeed, most of the characters remain where they started--or return there. Here there is not even the tentative movement beyond folly that we find in the comedy heroes. Roderigo was upbraiding Iago in the play's first lines and is still doing so in the letter that is his last communication. Cassio has again received a promotion and is again caught up in events he does not comprehend. Brabantio, had he lived, likely would have responded to Desdemona's death exactly as he did to her elopement: "This sight would make him do a desperate turn" (l. 208). Iago, like Jaques, Malvolio, and Shylock, the villains of the comedies, is opaque and static. His cryptic last words, "What you know, you know," (l. 304) reveal no more about him than did his overexplanatory soliloquies. Desdemona, just before her death, challenges Othello as she had challenged her father and defends herself with the same straightforward precision she used before the senate:

And have you mercy too! I never did
Offend you in my life, ... never lov'd Cassio,
But with such general warranty of heaven,
As I might love: I never gave him token.

(ll. 59-62)

Bianca comes forth to seek Cassio at her last appearance as at her first; both times she frankly declares her affection and is brusquely dismissed. Emilia's function and attitudes do change, however, though her character perhaps does not. She moves from tolerating men's fancies to exploding them and from prudent acceptance to courageous repudiation. She ceases to function as reconciler of the views of the men and the women, and the separation between them widens.

The play's ending is tragic; but it is also cankered comedy. The final speech effects a disengagement even greater than that which is usual at the end of the tragedies.
Avoiding mention of the love of Othello and Desdemona and direct reference to Othello's murder and suicide, it focuses on the "state matters" (3.4.153) which the lovers themselves earlier sought refuge in and on the punishment of Iago, who does, at this point, become a scapegoat. Lodovico asks us to see the tragedy as Iago's "work," to look forward with relish to his torture, and to avert our gaze from the bed and its significance. But the restoration of military order provides little satisfaction here. The speech does not look back over the events of the play, creating a sense of completion and exhaustion as in Romeo and Juliet and King Lear; it does not look forward to a new beginning, however equivocally, as do Hamlet and Macbeth. The conflict between the men and the women has not been eliminated or resolved. The men have been unable to turn the women's virtue into pitch, but the women have been unable to mend male fantasies. The comic resolution of male with female, idealism with realism, love with sex, the individual with society is aborted. The play concludes, not with symmetrical pairings off and a movement toward marriage beds, but with one final triangle: Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello dead on wedding sheets. We are made to look with Iago, ominously a survivor, at the "tragic lodging of this bed"; lodging here, with its resonance from other Shakespearean uses, concludes the play on a note of arrested growth, devastated fertility. "The object poisons sight"; it signifies destruction without catharsis, release without resolution. The pain and division of the ending are unmitigated, and the clarification it offers is intolerable. "Let it be hid" is our inevitable response.


**Source Database:** Literature Resource Center