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Shakespeare's *Othello* and the Insidious Creation of an Unwilling Villian

There's a saying: "Behind every great man is a great woman." The same, perhaps, could be said about the antithesis of a great man. Iago, the central antagonist of Shakespeare's *Othello*, is viewed by many readers as one of the great villains of literature. The way he maneuvers the other players like marionettes on strings is masterful. However, perhaps Iago is not the one pulling the strings; perhaps Iago has strings of his own. Those strings are most likely pulled by the true villain, his wife Emilia.

I say most likely because, as reader-response tells us, we can never know what the author intended. Thus, the text is created by the reader, his responses, his experience. For example, when reading Shakespeare with a feminist bent the role of women and their inferior position to men comes to light. Whether intentional or not, Shakespeare paints many of the women as either "Mary" or "Eve." Such a reading also raises the possibility that Emilia is actually the puppeteer. Many would consider this a stretch, but there are a number of passages that leave this option open-ended because, again, we cannot say with certainty that we know the author's intentions. In Act IV, Scene 3, Emilia seems to indirectly allude to the source of Iago's green eyes, saying, "But for the world, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?" (919). While as words, this is nothing more than a rhetorical question, such is not necessarily the case. There exists a sinister undertone to such a statement. To be frank, with the knowledge of her situation with Othello, my reaction was, "What? That's ridiculous." According to critics such as David Bleich,

because “the object of observation appears changed by the act of observation . . . knowledge is made by people and not found” (63).

It doesn't take a feminist to recognize throughout *Othello*, women are completely subservient to men. It is exhibited by a number of characters in the play but displayed most overtly through many of Iago's comments. In the last scene of Act I, Roderigo is so sorrowful he is ready to drown himself, but Iago is trying to reason with him as to why that's a terrible idea. He tells him to be patient, for “[Desdemona] must change for youth: when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice. She must have change, she must” (862). Iago equates men with reason while relating women to feelings. Women are creatures of desire and must strive to practice self-control. It would not be a stretch for this to be a belief of Shakespeare's too, conscious or not, as, despite the presence of Elizabeth, such logic was common in his era. Of course, during Shakespeare's life, both Emilia and Desdemona would have been played by men.

In Iago's next statement, he reassures Roderigo that he is with him: “I hate the Moor; my cause is hearted; thine hath no less reason” (862). Iago has so plainly tried to show the flaw in women is primarily due to their feeling natures, yet he is acting solely on emotion himself. He hates, he is heated, he wants revenge. (Note that Shakespeare has shown a glimpse of Iago out of power, out of control.) The most interesting clue by far, though, is revealed by Iago after Roderigo has gone. Speaking alone, he says,

I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
He has done my office: I know not if't be true,
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety (863)

For mere suspicion? Iago has fled the realms of logic and reason. Following Shakespeare and Iago's own proposed methods of thought then, Iago is taking on the characteristics of a woman. Acting on yearnings of passion and desire, he has reversed the roles of gender. Also, his constant shirking from danger and continual cowardice in battle further undermine his masculinity.

The other side of the coin involves Emilia's assumption of a traditionally more masculine position and attitude. Although she fails to elevate the moral grounds of women, she certainly seems to push for their empowerment. However, such exaltation would come from the perspective of traditional feminist theory, which encourages looking at the different stereotypes, positions of power, and gender relations. But, as Lynn states, post-feminism argues that "our comfortable assumptions ought to be destabilized" (214). By exposing Shakespeare's obvious subjugation of women, we undermine its power, as believed by the early feminists. Yet the new wave goes past that point. It assumes that while women may not be on completely even ground, they have reached a place where they can choose their own destiny, really. Emilia is very much expected to obey Iago, and she serves Desdemona, but she never seems to play the role of the servant.

Post-feminism looks to "reject the idea that women are inevitably victims oppressed by men" (213). While the first wave sought equality and the second wave sought supremacy, the third wave simply wants the whole business of gender and sexuality to go away. Emilia is a woman who seems to play the role of a man. While Othello, Roderigo, Cassio, and even Iago are being led by their hearts and heated blood, she is always acting with cool calculation. It's not hard to believe she understood the consequences when, after giving Iago the handkerchief, she ensures he will put it to use by saying, "If it be not for some purpose of import/ Give 't me again; poor lady! she'll run mad/ When she shall lack it" (892). She knows it will cause Desdemona, her supposed lady, much grief, but she still takes and gives it. She further blurs the lines of gender by hurting Desdemona to help herself: Emilia, in other words, will never shout, "Girl power." She is in it for one person and one person alone. She's post-feminism minus the morals. Later, she further injures her lady by her lack of action. Othello is near a murderous rage with Desdemona's handkerchief missing, and despite full knowledge of its whereabouts, Emilia stays loud as a mime. She does point out that "[men] are all but stomachs, and we all but food" (900). She obviously carries the concept of gender, she just doesn't always adhere to its rules.

She also seems to be carrying out her own plan, and a prime facet of that plan involved Othello. It is very intriguing how Shakespeare

introduces such a seemingly marginal character, Emilia, in the midst of such dramatic circumstances. To return to an earlier binary, Emilia, from the first mention of her name, is portrayed as an “Eve” instead of a “Mary.” During her first appearance in Act II, we see the tension between Emilia and Iago. Speaking of Emilia, Iago says,

Come on, come on; you are pictures out of doors
 Bells in your parlours, wild cats in your kitchens,
 Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,
 Players in your housewifery, and housewives
 in your beds (867)

The way he describes her outside the house seems almost complimentary, almost as if he’s portraying her as a “Mary.” But his tone changes quickly: “You rise to play and go to bed to work” (867). Other than her association with Othello, there is very little concerning Emilia that has anything to do with sex. Since Emilia is written with fewer lines than many of the characters, we often must rely on others to provide a backdrop by which to study her. However, when she is speaking, it is typically consistent in tone: warm and consoling to her lady, sarcastic and bitter toward her husband *until* about midway through the play. Discovering Desdemona’s handkerchief, she ignores how much Desdemona treasures such an item and thinks,

I’ll have the work ta’en out,
 And giv’t Iago:
 What he will do with it heaven knows, not I;
 I nothing but to please his fantasy (892)

When juxtaposed with some of her more snide remarks concerning her husband, it seems that this would most likely be sarcasm. The question is, did Shakespeare intend it? When reading with attention to the reader’s experience, though, this question becomes irrelevant. The reader’s response is what counts. According to Lynn, “The perceiver plays an active role in the making of any meaning and that literary works in particular have a subjective status” (62). As stated earlier, while reading the play, I interpreted lines to have underlying meaning,

It is certainly dangerous to state that each reader creates the text, as someone could, really, say just about anything. While Louise Rosenblatt, a true pioneer of the reader-response movement, “called for criticism that involved a ‘personal sense of literature, an unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction’” (62-63), she also acknowledges the consideration of “some readings to be incorrect or inappropriate because they are unsupportable by the text” (64). Thus, a true critique must consist of more than one reader balled up in a recliner, noting how each passage speaks to her soul. It is important, then, to compare the individual responses. The reader shapes the text in the same way the text shapes the reader.

With that in mind, *Othello* becomes even more intriguing, as one must ask what was seen on stage. For many in the audience, a certain delivery or facial expression from the actors could have influenced their viewing experience. Take Emilia’s single line with which I began my argument. Were the actress playing Emilia to deliver that line in a higher melodic tone, it would very likely seem quite benign—even to the well-versed theater audiences of the Elizabethan era—but were it spoken an octave lower or with strength behind it, especially if Emilia turned away with a distracted look in her eye, as if she’s remembering something, it’s very, very probable that audiences would pick up on that and begin to question her actions and motivations. It’s the type of comment that, if overlooked by even the actor or director (or writer), it could have almost no impact on the play, yet were any one of those three to determine the line to have great importance and treat it as such, the entire meaning of the play would then hinge on one miniscule detail. “Who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?” Apparently Emilia would, and why not? After all, should her infidelity elevate Iago to such royal status, would that not make her a queen? It’s not a terrible idea, to sleep with someone and be rewarded with a crown.

My feminist approach spawned from a single line, which then encouraged me to re-read the work with a feminist lens. Just because I speculate about the idea does not make it truth. Perhaps, in an attempt to further heighten the villainy of Iago, Shakespeare had him fooling Emilia into believing she was in control as well. On Iago’s part, that would have been mastermind; on Shakespeare’s, dizzying,

and none can say undoubtedly that one way is so any more than the other. Again, the text is created by the reader as we can never truly know what the author intended.

How might the viewers of Shakespeare's day view the play differently than even today's audiences, much less today's readers? Would Emilia's intentions have seemed more or less obvious to such a crowd? While audiences of today might appreciate the soap-operatic elements of the storyline, as theatre was ingrained into the daily lives of Elizabethan viewers, often going to plays three to four times a week, I venture to guess the older crowd would have picked up on such subtlety and nuance a bit more quickly. Knowing the likelihood of the audience catching a line like Emilia's, too, exposes to us the likelihood of Shakespeare's writing it in such a manner. If it were unlikely for any present to recognize his utilization, it would be equally unlikely for Shakespeare to attempt such a feat, much less invent the situation.

Thus, in attempting a "marriage" of the feminist and reader-response approaches, it comes to light that, while women are often subjugated and subservient in Shakespeare, it seems that in *Othello*, one might have slipped by him. But why should we be surprised? Just as millions have read *Othello* and never once had the notion of Emilia's machinations, could not Shakespeare have also missed it? He wrote the characters of Iago, Othello, and Desdemona, and Emilia outwitted them all - why couldn't she also outwit their creator? We can only see what we believe possible to see. Why should Shakespeare prove the exception? Because he was taught to think "like a man," he might not have even considered the possibility, but it seems Emilia has taken on a life of her own. The lethal seductress, Emilia showed reason throughout and was quite possibly behind the orchestration.