

Original Paper

## How Women Destroy Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*

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### Abstract

The reasons behind Iago's destruction will be explored. Jealous envy of men who have successful relationships with women is one reason. Iago's wife Emilia is another. She is the first to discover his treacherous plot against Othello. But Iago's general hatred of women will also be scrutinized as the main reason for his destruction.

### Introduction

Iago's opinion of and relationships with women in William Shakespeare's *Othello* are offensive, condescending and degrading. Failed experiences with women and the current antagonistic, unfulfilling condition of his marriage to Emilia have left Iago envious of men who are capable of having a loving or successful relationship with "the better half."

Othello appears to have just such a relationship with his new bride Desdemona. Iago uses this marriage to destroy Othello for the ostensible reason of his having passed Iago over for promotion to Lieutenant. But this initial motive is soon superseded by Iago's envious jealousy of Othello's marriage itself.

The appointment to Lieutenant of the aristocratic, well-mannered Florentine Michael Cassio is the immediate event that moves Iago against Othello. But his plan of destruc-

tion is hardly a complete one or well thought out. However, by the end of Act I Iago is no longer concerned with the Lieutenantcy. He wishes to destroy Othello completely and his driving force is jealous envy of Othello's marriage to Desdemona.

The fascinating aspect of his plan and its denouement is the central role and effect women have on it. It's a double pronged role, emanating from Iago's own warped feelings of hate for women as a whole and his personal relationship and feelings for, and with, Desdemona and his wife Emilia.

These two aspects come together to destroy Othello but at the same time Iago's hatred turns back upon himself as Emilia, blind to Iago's envious revenge throughout most of the play, in Act V finally sees Iago's true nature and destroys her husband.

The audience understands Iago's antipathy

toward women in Act I when he schemes with Roderigo, whom he had promised to help win the hand of Desdemona in marriage, to destroy Othello's marriage with Desdemona. Both of them go to Desdemona's father Brabantio and tell him that Desdemona has married Othello. Iago's words are pornographic:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tugging your white ewe;  
(I, i, 87-89)

Brabantio, woken up in the middle of the night by these two men, is not in a mood to listen to what they have to say. When he finds out one of them is Roderigo, whose suit for Desdemona he has rejected, he becomes even more enraged (I, i, 95-101).

At this point Iago speaks up again, and what he says is just as dirty as before:

you'll have  
your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse:  
you'll/have your nephews neigh to you;  
(I, i, 110-112)

Brabantio himself calls Iago "profane," which Iago doesn't deny adding:

your daughter,  
and the Moor, are now making the beast  
with two/backs.  
(I, i, 115-117)

Contrast Iago's words with Roderigo's. All he says is that Desdemona has been taken "To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor:" (I, i, 126) And later:

Your daughter  
hath made a gross revolt,/Tying her duty,  
beauty, wit, and fortunes,/In an extravagant  
and wheeling stranger...  
(I, i, 133-136)

Many scholars pay attention to the racial

aspects of Iago's words and overlook the meaning of the base sexual comments made by him. Iago sees sex as an animal act, without human love, feeling, or sincerity between the partners.

Iago also believes Othello and Desdemona will be incapable of loving one another for very long. Of Othello Iago says:

The food that to him now is as luscious as  
locusts,/shall be shortly as acerb as the  
coloquintida.  
(I, iii, 349-350)

Of Desdemona he says:

When she is sated with his body, she will  
find the/error of her choice; she must have  
change,  
(I, iii, 351-352)

Iago, in his soliloquy at the end of Act I, admits the revenge he seeks on Othello is not for passing him over and promoting Cassio to Lieutenant. This pretext has been abandoned and replaced by jealous envy of Othello and Desdemona's marriage. This jealous envy in turn brings Desdemona and Emilia into Iago's plan to destroy Othello. Iago even believes Othello has slept with Emilia (I, iii, 385-386). This is the first time we hear of it and Iago uses this, not his failed promotion, as justification to continue his plans to ruin their marriage after his failure to prevent it by using Brabantio (I, iii, 387-389).

Iago has moved into more dangerous territory. Anonymously enraging Brabantio never had a chance of hurting Iago. But now he proposes to use Michael Cassio in a plot to frame him as the secret lover of Desdemona. If Othello finds out the truth, that it is all a lie, his wrath upon Iago will know no bounds. Cassio has all the characteristics that would make the affair plausible to Othello. Cassio is a "proper man," but at the same time has a

reputation with the ladies:

He has a person and a smooth dispose,  
To be suspected, fram'd to make women  
false:

(I, iii, 395-396)

In other words he has the qualities Iago himself desires. Iago is now seeking to destroy two men he wishes he could be.

In Act II the play moves to the island of Cyprus, where it will remain. At the beginning of scene i everyone except Othello has arrived safely in Cyprus. Desdemona, Cassio, Iago and his wife Emilia are all anxiously waiting to see Othello's ship come into harbor.

Iago makes a remark that blames Emilia for talking too much (II, i, 103-104). When she protests, Iago goes further and accuses her of all sorts of things revealing some of the pent up frustrations he has about his wife:

Come on, come on, you are pictures out o'  
doors;  
Bells in your parlours; wild-cats in your  
kitchens;  
Saints in your injuries; devils being of-  
fended;  
Players in your housewifery; and house-  
wives in your beds.

(II, i, 109-113)

Desdemona then confronts Iago and demands to know what he would say of her. His initial answer:

O gentle lady, do not put me to 't,/For I am  
nothing, if not critical.

(II, i, 118-119)

is revealing. "Critical" forbodes his later lies to Othello about her chastity.

Iago can't be as explicit in his use of language toward Desdemona as he is toward

Emilia, so he comes up with some witty rhymes to answer her. One particular jest has importance for the future: "To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail;" (II, i, 155). While scholars disagree over the exact meaning of the line, the general sense is clear: "to make a foolish exchange."<sup>11</sup> That foolish exchange suggests her position in Venetian society as the daughter of Brabantio, a Senator of Venice, which she gave up for the love of a Moor.

Act II is also important for Iago's reaction to his destruction of Cassio. Iago succeeds in getting the teetotaling Cassio drunk, the malleable Roderigo to start a row with Cassio and Cassio's dismissal as Lieutenant. The dismissal occurs when Cassio, roused into a drunken frenzy by his fight with Roderigo, mistakenly turns on Montano, the previous Governor of Cyprus, trying to kill him. Cassio, who prides himself on his aristocratic upbringing, is clearly humiliated:

Drunk? and speak parrot? and/squabble?  
swagger? swear? and discourse fustian/with  
one's own shadow? O thou invisible spirit of  
wine, if thou hast no name to be known by,  
let us call/thee devil!

(II, iii, 271-275)

Iago seems now to be in line for Cassio's Lieutenantcy, his previous slight now to be healed. But Iago wants to bring Othello down. He no longer cares about the Lieutenantcy. He is focused on Othello's marriage. To destroy it he will use Desdemona herself to achieve what he now calls his "peculiar end."

Iago suggests to Cassio that in order to gain his Lieutenantcy back, he should go through Desdemona. She is the only one who can change Othello's mind:

Our general's  
wife is now the general; I may say so in this

respect,/for that he has devoted and given up himself/to the contemplation, mark and denotement of her parts/and graces. Confess yourself freely to her, importune/her she'll help to put you in your place again:

(II, iii, 305-310)

Iago is setting up Desdemona to plead Cassio's case to Othello. Iago's plan to destroy Othello by telling him false reports about her adultery with Cassio will now be much easier for Othello to believe. In a soliloquy towards the end of scene iii Iago lets it be known that he now wants to bring down not only Othello but everyone close to him as well:

And by how much she strives to do him good,/She shall undo her credit with the Moor;

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,/And out of her own goodness make the net/That shall enmesh 'em all.

(II, iii, 349-353)

Iago's rage is directed toward what he can never be. He, unlike Othello, can never hope to have a loving relationship with a woman. His words with Emilia would be proof enough without all the other lewd remarks about sex he made to Brabantio in Act I. Nor, like Cassio, can he hope to court the ladies with the sophisticated aristocratic talents he does not possess. Iago is not satisfied with self-loathing about his sexual defects. He seeks to hurt others who can excel at what he only dreams of.

In Act III Emilia and Desdemona still have no idea what Iago is up to. Cassio has taken Iago's advice and asked Desdemona for help in reinstating him into the good graces of Othello. In scene iii she promises Cassio she'll be his advocate and Emilia seconds her

actions by referring to Iago:

Good madam, do, I know it grieves my husband,/As if the case were his.

(III, iii, 3-4)

Desdemona's reply equally proves her ignorance of Iago's motives: "O, that's an honest fellow:" (III, iii, 5)

Iago also succeeds in turning Othello into an Iago. Iago begins by asking a seamlessly harmless question of Othello:

Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,/Know of your love?

(III, iii, 95-96)

This begins a long parley between the two. Othello wants to know his reason for asking such a question while Iago protests its innocuity. Othello, however, is persistent and finally draws Iago's answer:

I speak not yet of proof;

Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio;

(III, iii, 200-201)

Othello now begins to suspect Desdemona of adultery. But he has no proof except the suspicions "honest" Iago puts into his mind about her and Cassio. This is enough, however, to bring Othello's mind into close contact with Iago's. By the end of their conversation Othello is so far under Iago's spell he asks Iago to spy on Desdemona:

Farewell, if more

Thou dost perceive, let me know more, set on/Thy wife to observe; leave me Iago.

(III, iii, 242-244)

From here on Othello begins to view women as Iago does. They are not to be trusted, they become "whores" and "strumpets" and are always up to no good.

Desdemona's handkerchief now comes into

the play, affecting all the main characters drastically. Desdemona drops her handkerchief after offering it to Othello when he complains of a headache. Othello brushes it away, out of Desdemona's hand, and it drops to the floor. Both leave the room and the handkerchief stays on the floor until Emilia finds it. She knows how much her husband wants this handkerchief yet she doesn't know the reason. She dutifully gives it to Iago. Then when she asks Iago what he will use it for he is short and dismissive:

Be not you know on 't, I have use for it: ...  
Go leave me:

(III, iii, 324-325)

Emilia does go, and we hear no protest from her. Iago, already successful in getting the Moor to suspect Desdemona of infidelity, will now turn the screws even tighter.

Othello reappears. He has visibly degenerated and is now engulfed in Iago's jealous envy. He demands from Iago "ocular proof" of Desdemona's treachery. If Iago fails to produce it he vows to force Iago to "answer my wak'd wrath," for falsely putting him into this frame of mind (III, iii, 369).

Othello demands of Iago: "Give me a living reason, that she's disloyal" (III, iii, 415). Iago tells a farcical story about hearing Cassio talk in his sleep about loving Desdemona and cursing the Moor for having her. This alone drives Othello to say of Desdemona: "I'll tear her all to pieces." (III, iii, 438).

But Iago has even more. He tells Othello he has seen Cassio wiping his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello is now conquered. Jealousy dominates his being:

O that a slave had forty thousand lives!  
One is too poor, too weak for my revenge:  
Now I do see 'tis true;

(III, iii, 449-451)

And that revenge means death for Cassio:

Within these three days, let me hear thee say  
That Cassio's not alive.

(III, iii, 479-480)

The metamorphosis is complete. Othello is Iago, and they are one. Together they will not only destroy those who impel their revenge, but will in turn destroy themselves.

In scene iv Othello confronts Desdemona over the handkerchief and she lies about it. She claims it is not lost (III, iv, 81&83). (Iago is even capable of making the virtuous Desdemona into a liar.)

Othello's sudden mood change toward Desdemona in scene iv brings a prescient line from Emilia on a woman's relationship with her man:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:  
They are all but stomachs, and we all but  
food;  
They eat us hungerly, and when they are  
full,/They belch us.

(III, iv, 100-103)

Emilia does not understand Iago, yet she is capable of making this statement. It is a flash of insight from a woman who will soon be looking at her husband in a whole new light, no longer ignorant of his plans.

Act IV opens with yet another lie as Iago tells Othello that he has heard from Cassio's mouth that he did indeed lie with Desdemona (IV, i, 34). This drives Othello into an epileptic fit. Upon his recovery Iago succeeds in putting him into a murdering frenzy by setting him up to eavesdrop on a conversation between himself and Cassio. Iago makes Othello believe that Iago and Cassio will be discussing Desdemona when in fact Cassio is bragging about his relationship with Bianca. When Iago returns to Othello he is dead set

on murder for Cassio: "How shall I murder him, Iago?" (IV, i, 166), and the same for his wife:

And let her rot, and perish, and be damned  
to-night,/for she shall not live;  
(IV, i, 177-178)

Act IV continues the downward spiral of Othello, a man who once implicitly trusted the virtue of his wife but who now hates her with a force as strong as Iago's general misogyny.

Othello in scene i strikes Desdemona, calling her "devil" (IV, i, 235). He never would have thought of doing this before Iago got hold of him. Later, in scene ii, Othello calls Desdemona a "whore" (IV, ii, 88).

Iago's perverse convictions about women continue to inflict their damage on Othello. Iago tries to soothe Othello by telling him he is not the only one to be cuckolded by his wife:

there's millions now alive  
That nightly lies in those unproper beds  
Which they dare swear peculiar:  
(IV, i, 67-69)

Iago's insinuations not only torment Othello, but also relieve Iago's own frustrations. Iago wants to believe millions of men have been cuckolded, to accord with his own perverse values.<sup>2)</sup>

Emilia, toward the end of Act IV, seems to be getting closer to perceiving the essence of her husband but does not yet understand that what she is saying applies to Iago:

Why, we have galls: and though we have  
some grace,  
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands  
know,  
Their wives have sense like them:  
(IV, iii, 92-94)

And later:

Then let them use us well: else let them  
know,  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.  
(IV, iii, 102-103)

Emilia's words foreshadow what she will do to Iago in Act V. Her discovery of Iago's plan will force him to come out into the open. Iago's reaction to Emilia will reveal his flaw: his total lack of understanding of and his hatred for women.

Act V opens with Roderigo attacking Cassio. Iago has made Roderigo think that with Cassio gone his chances to have Desdemona will increase (V, i, 9-10). Iago, however, sees Cassio's death in a different light:

if Cassio do remain,  
He has a daily beauty in his life,  
That makes me ugly:  
(V, i, 18-20)

Here again we are shown Iago's envy of men who are successful with women. They must die for the simple reason that they understand women better than he.

In the ensuing fight Roderigo and Cassio injure each other, neither with a mortal wound. Iago kills the injured Roderigo to keep his plans secret and pretends to stumble across Cassio as if he hadn't known Cassio had been in a fight (V, i, 56). Iago calls others for help to attend Cassio's wounds and is acting as expected in the eyes of everyone present: honest, dutiful, a man you can trust.

Cassio's mistress Bianca then arrives and Iago tries to put the blame for Cassio's injuries onto her:

Gentlemen all, I do suspect this trash  
To bear a part in this:  
(V, i, 85-86)

Later, with Emilia now present, Iago says the cause of the whole incident was "the fruit of whoring" (V, i, 115). Emilia calls Bianca a "strumpet," agreeing completely with Iago's accusations toward Bianca (V, i, 120).

Even this late in the play Iago still has Emilia in the dark. Iago had no evidence that Bianca is involved except her admittance that Cassio that night "supp'd at my house" (V, i, 118). But this hardly is evidence to accuse a woman with attempted murder. Also, that Bianca could injure Cassio and murder Roderigo with a sword is impossible to believe, even if both men had been deficient in swordsmanship.

Iago's plan is still safe, his wife still loyal, under his control. He even has enough confidence to send Emilia to the citadel to tell Othello what has happened, even though he knows that Othello could be committing grave harm upon Desdemona at that very moment:

Emilia, run you to the citadel,  
And tell my lord and lady what has happ'd:  
(V, i, 125-126)

Emilia's epiphany comes when her mistress Desdemona's purity is challenged by Othello. This she will not consider and it is this belief in the virtuous character of a woman that brings Iago down.

When Emilia arrives at the citadel Othello has already suffocated Desdemona with a pillow. In her last gasp of life Desdemona blamelessly puts the responsibility for her death upon herself. But Othello admits his hand in her death to Emilia.

Othello, trying to justify the murder of his wife, uses Iago's misogynist vocabulary:

She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore.  
(V, ii, 133)

and:

Cassio did top her, ask thy husband else;  
(V, ii, 137)

From this line Emilia begins to understand her husband's central position in Othello's change of behavior toward Desdemona. By line 156 she is able to say of Iago's charge that Cassio and Desdemona committed adultery:

If he say so may his pernicious soul  
Rot half a grain a day! he lies to the heart,  
(V, ii, 156-157)

When Iago subsequently enters the bed-chamber he is confronted by a new Emilia, demanding to know Iago's role in her mistress' death:

Disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man;  
He says thou told'st him that his wife was false,  
I know thou didst not, thou art not such a villain:  
Speak, for my heart is full.  
(V, ii, 173-176)

Iago admits that he told Othello that Desdemona was false, "I did." Iago could have easily lied to Emilia as he has lied to everyone else but he still believes in his control over his wife. He doesn't realize her new found strength to disobey him. Iago thinks he can simply instruct Emilia to "get you home," (V, ii, 195) but Emilia breaks away from Iago completely:

'Tis proper I obey him, but not now:  
Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home."  
(V, ii, 197-198)

Iago tries to silence Emilia again: "Zounds, hold your peace." (V, ii, 219) and: "Be wise, and get you home." (V, ii, 224), but Emilia is no longer fooled by Iago's outer "honest" facade. She knows he is a liar and a murderer

and she will have justice for Desdemona's murder:

'Twill out, it will: I hold my peace sir, no,  
I'll be in speaking, liberal as the air,  
Let heaven, and men, and devils, let' em all,  
All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.  
(V, ii, 220-223)

This brings Iago's true self out into the open. He threatens to stab Emilia as a warning for her to be quiet (V, ii, 224). But Emilia goes on unheeding now of her husband's threats. She tells Othello the truth about the handkerchief. Iago loses all control, reminiscent of what he has turned Othello into, and calls Emilia a "whore," and "filth." Othello then runs at Iago trying to stab him but fails. The confusion allows Iago to stab Emilia, this time successfully, and she dies next to Desdemona on the same bed. Iago tries to escape, is apprehended, brought back to the bedchamber and is present when Othello commits suicide, distraught over his murder of Desdemona for false accusations. Iago is taken away, remorseless, to be censured by the governor, in the words of Lodovico, Brabantio's kinsman, under the harshest circumstances:

The time, the place, the torture: O, enforce

it!

(V, ii, 370)

In Iago's eyes, after Emilia exposes his treachery, she is no longer his wife. She is just one more woman to be loathed and never understood by him. The choice of Emilia by Shakespeare as the person to destroy Iago is important. Iago's only successful relationship with a woman was with Emilia. Success for him was control and he believed he had control over his wife. If there was any doubt it was wiped away by the handkerchief. Emilia gave it to him with only a small protest over what he wanted to do with it. But Iago was able to brush this off easily and his plan continued on successfully. So imagine Iago's horror upon entering Othello and Desdemona's bedchamber and being confronted by his wife with complicity in Othello's murder of Desdemona. His only success, the only control he has ever had over a woman, is no longer there. (His instinct immediately categorizes Emilia with all other women in Iago's mind: to be abhorred and despised for making him feel insufficient with them.) He now has no qualms about killing her. She is woman, not wife, not Emilia any longer. She is a "whore," "strumpet;" like all the rest.

#### References

- 1) Ridley MR, ed. (1993) *The Arden Shakespeare Othello*. London: Routledge.
- 2) Cahn VL (1991) *Shakespeare The Playwright A Companion To The Complete Tragedies, Histories, Comedies, And Romances*, Greenwood Press, New York.

#### Notes

- 1) Ridley MR "Introduction," p.57.
- 2) Cahn VL *Shakespeare The Playwright A Companion To The Complete Tragedies, Histories, Comedies, And Romances*, p.157.