

The Woman Who Wanted to be a Soldier

Ania Loomba provides a strong critical response to Shakespeare's *Othello* in her article *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*. Loomba discusses the many stereotypes that Othello faces as a black Moor, yet she highlights Othello's influence in how he is viewed. Loomba claims that, "Othello also mimics Venetian and Christian discourse to his own advantage, and strategically involves his non-Venetian lineage and history when suits him" (107). Othello's ability to utilize various rhetorical strategies and step into different roles, such as that of established war hero, contrasts greatly with Desdemona, who is confined to solely one position: her status as a woman. Desdemona wishes that she had greater power and roles that could give her meaning; most important of these is her desire to live like a soldier. She shows a great interest in duty, loyalty, and sacrifice; moreover she is attracted to battle stories, for they are what drew her to Othello in the first place. However, despite her desire to acquire different roles, men prevent her from doing so by confining her to a tightly controlled role. Thus, despite the discrimination that both Othello and Desdemona face on account of issues such as race or gender, Desdemona is in a far more challenging position because she cannot utilize different roles to influence how she is viewed.

Othello's strength as a soldier, his elegant rhetoric, and his reputation all provide a variety of ways in which he can be perceived, other than simply being defined by the colour of his skin. In the first extensive speech that Othello makes, he reveals that the stories he would tell illustrating his battle prowess caused Desdemona to become attracted to him. Desdemona's father, Brabantio, also "loved" Othello, no doubt on account of his greatness as a soldier (1.3 127). Since this speech is about Othello's greatness as a warrior, and it is the first significant debut that he makes in the play, one can infer that Othello is primarily presented as a noble soldier even before racial prejudices have entered the play extensively. He is celebrated as "brave Othello" (2.1 39) whose

virtue makes him appear “far more fair than black” to the Duke (1.3 289). However, one might argue that the fact that Othello must defend his union with Desdemona shows that he is not being treated favourably at all. Yet, despite this, Othello has agency and power precisely because he is able to argue for himself and change how the Duke and Brabantio receive him, which is something that Desdemona lacks the power to accomplish.

Othello’s manner of discourse highlights his ability to modify his identity and his separation from all supposedly “barbaric” cultures. In Othello’s speech regarding his union with Desdemona, he addresses Brabantio and the Duke in a duly respectful manner and his speech is graceful. Later on in the play, Othello uses skills of rhetoric yet again to distinguish himself as an honourable and civilized man. For instance, when reprimanding Montano and Cassio for fighting, he employs the phrases “for Christian shame” and “are we turned Turks” (2.3 155, 153). Hence, Othello is clearly separating himself from the Turkish “other” while acting according to what he considers to be Christian virtue. As Loomba states, Othello is able to “consolidate his own position in Venice by establishing his distance from cannibals and monsters whom he has overcome, and Turks whom he has fought and will continue to combat” (107).

Desdemona is constrained and reduced by her status as a woman largely because that is her *only* status, unlike Othello who can use his status as a warrior to fight ugly stereotypes about his status as a black man. From the beginning, Desdemona shows a desire to expand roles and take part in a world that is clearly dominated by males. As stated earlier, Desdemona is initially drawn to Othello because of his stories about the battles and hardships that he suffered. Apparently, she embraced every story “with a greedy ear” and “loved [Othello] for the dangers [he] had passed” (1.3 148; 166). Curiously, Desdemona “wished/ That heaven had made her such a man” (1.3 162). Either this sentence could be read as Desdemona wishing she were married to such a brave, warrior-like man, or it could be interpreted as Desdemona wishing she were such a man herself. I

would argue that Desdemona wishes she were like a soldier, which would account for her complete fascination with Othello's war stories. Later on, Desdemona even alludes to her desire for a more masculine role directly, or at least a role that gives her power and meaning, by referring to herself as an "unhandsome warrior" in a conversation with Emilia (3.4 147). Desdemona views herself as a warrior, yet the male world does not perceive her as such; only her fellow woman, Emilia, understands Desdemona and fights for her.

Desdemona demonstrates a strong desire for purpose in her quest to live like a soldier. For instance, this is revealed through her promise to help Cassio enter back on good terms with Othello. She seems incredibly earnest to help Cassio, even willing to put Cassio's needs above Othello's in stating that "my lord shall never rest./ I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience" (3.3 22-23). This seems unusual because throughout the entire play Desdemona shows an incredibly powerful dedication to obeying and pleasing Othello. Then, Desdemona even tells Cassio that "thy solicitor shall rather die/ Than give thy cause away" (3.3 27-28). This statement displays firm resolve, loyalty, and courage regarding death, all of which are soldierly traits. Desdemona's earnestness could show that she is desperate for some meaning and purpose in her life, something that is worth fighting for, more than simply being a wife. Her firm loyalty here is reflective of her earlier plea to accompany Othello to Cyprus, rather than staying behind (1.3 247-59). It seems that Desdemona has a bold and adventurous spirit that is hungry for meaning and experiences, as well as for companionship.

It certainly seems odd to argue that Desdemona longs to have a soldier-like role, given that she appears to be fairly weak-willed and submissive throughout the entire play. However, rather than viewing Desdemona's actions as weak subservience, they could be construed as her simply trying to fulfill duty, just as a soldier would. In fact, duty is the first thing that Desdemona discusses in the play. Her first sentence in the play occurs when Brabantio is hostilely questioning

Othello about marrying his daughter. Desdemona tells Brabantio, “My noble father,/ I do perceive here a divided duty” and she goes on to state her choice to be dutiful to her husband over her father (1.3 179-180). Desdemona uses reason in speaking with her father, rather than making an emotional or feminine appeal. She reveals duty and respect to be the guiding forces behind her actions, which demonstrates that the codes of honour typically found among men influence her behaviour greatly. Desdemona’s reliance on this soldier-like, characteristically male rhetorical strategy which argues for reason and duty reveals that she views herself principally as a warrior rather than a female. She is extremely determined in carrying out her duty. For instance, she is dutiful to Othello even in death; she defends him by saying that she killed herself rather than letting his name and reputation be tarnished (5.2 132). Hence, from her first words to her last words in the play, Desdemona displays a firm commitment to fulfilling her duty rather than to performing actions that would benefit her foremost.

No matter how honourable and devoted Desdemona may demonstrate herself to be, she will never be truly trusted simply because she is a woman. Iago illustrates this abysmal reality when he tells Othello that “Her honour is an essence that’s not seen./ They have it oft that have it not./ But for the handkerchief– ” (4.1 16-18). In other words, women’s honour is invisible, in addition to the fact that stereotypes of woman already assert that women have no honour, so the only mark of whether a woman is honourable is found in something absolutely solid and material. What a woman says bears no importance because, supposedly, every woman lacks credibility; only outside sources can prove whether she is worthy or not. For the men of this play, their word, honour, and reputation are held as solid truths. The power of a man lies in his name or reputation; men’s honour is not merely defined by material objects but by words and actions. On the other hand, Desdemona’s character is defined by a mere piece of fabric, which, in turn, devalues and cheapens her. Women’s vows bear no importance, such as when Emilia is asserting the goodness

and fidelity of Desdemona but she is completely brushed aside by Othello (5.2 143-44). Words equate to power; therefore, if men do not believe women based on what they say, women are essentially powerless in how they are viewed. In this play, a woman's attempt to have more than one role is futile because, since women cannot change how men view them, any other role that they take on will immediately lose power as soon as a man's word questions it.

Desdemona herself is treated like an object since both her father and Othello refer to her in possessive terms. Brabantio exclaims that Desdemona was "stol'n from me" (1.3 60) when she married Othello and Othello states that he "won" her (1.3 94). Furthermore, Othello tells Desdemona "Come, my dear love,/ The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue./ That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you" (2.3 8-10). The fact that Othello is discussing his relationship with Desdemona in monetary terms is demeaning; surely he would never refer to his fellow soldiers in such a way. Evidently, Desdemona is greatly constrained because men can always dominate her in some way, believing that her only role is to please them.

Sadly, despite Desdemona's desire to become a more powerful woman with a greater array of roles, she retreats into the role that she knows Othello wants her to fill: being his wife. When Othello is interrogating Desdemona on account of his suspicions that she has made him a cuckold, he asks her "Why, what art thou?" (4.2 35) To this, Desdemona replies, "Your wife, my lord, your true and loyal wife." (4.2 36) When it comes down to it, Desdemona has only one role that bears any real value in the world that she lives in; her value is based on the men that she is tied to, whether she is daughter of Brabantio or the wife of Othello. She is trapped in a repressive role that does not affirm her value outside of her belonging to other men. It seems odd that Othello asks Desdemona what she is, and that he then tells her to swear that she is honest (4.2 40). It is as if he is desperately trying to establish that she is honest by using the male system of word and honour which would be enough to establish a man's trustworthiness. However, Othello seems simply

unable to define Desdemona's character based on a male system of invisible word; Desdemona swears that she is honest but he just cannot believe her. The fact that she is a woman is the only thing that is preventing him from believing her. Hence, she is yet again limited by her status as a woman and lacks agency.

In conclusion, although both Othello and Desdemona are victims of unjust stereotypes, Desdemona receives far worse treatment. She is singularly confined to her role as a woman and even though she may exemplify the characteristics of a brave and dutiful soldier, men will always fail to realize her true value. Othello and Brabantio define her in terms of how she is possessed by them, and material objects stand in for her own word or honour. Desdemona lacks agency whereas Othello can easily flit from one rhetorical strategy to another as he brings out his status as a soldier and his separation from the cultural "other." Loomba is absolutely correct in saying that Othello utilizes various different roles to change how he is perceived. Even in death, Othello still manages to use a rhetorical strategy to influence how his deed was perceived. He expresses that he "loved not wisely but too well" and threw "a pearl away," meaning Desdemona (5.2 353; 356). Thus, even at the very end Othello manipulates the situation and retains some power by using a rhetorical strategy that seems poetic, almost European. It seems unfair that he is able to do so, and justify himself somehow; Desdemona, on the other hand, suffered quietly and dutifully. Moreover, after dying Desdemona is still referred to in terms of possession and material value, being a "pearl." Desdemona's life is tragically overshadowed by men that limit her greatly.

Works Cited

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