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Shakespeare Mirrors Misogyny: Hyper-Masculine Projection of Emotions and Female Deprivation of Agency in Othello

Iago is perhaps the most cold-hearted of all Shakespearean villains: his vague, rage-filled motives and actions leave the audience wondering what message Shakespeare is attempting to convey in Othello. However, once one inspects Iago's relationship with his wife Emelia, a deeper understanding emerges. Iago's vengeance plan against Othello is a spawn of jealousy and suspected infidelity in his relationship with Emelia, yet Iago hides this from the audience. Instead, he belittles Othello for embodying the same jealousy. Iago blames Emelia for his rage, in spite of her efforts to please him. When Emelia realizes the tragedy was devised by Iago and speaks out, he kills her without hesitation. Iago's manipulative and insecure character speaks to the larger toxicities within a misogynistic society. Shakespearean works remain popular for their cunning vocabulary and characters. However, the cultural resonance that unites audiences regardless of cultural and temporal differences is most important. Unfortunately, part of this resonance lies within Shakespearean society's misogynistic and patriarchal qualities. Through Othello, Shakespeare mirrors society, displaying progressive insights about how misogyny leads to tragedy.

Iago's mysterious motives in causing disharmony makes Iago more complex, while simultaneously gaining credibility with an audience accustomed to misogyny. Some argue he is racist, referring to Othello as "the devil" many times because of his race (2.1.216). Others argue Iago's desire to be lieutenant spurs him into a jealous rage -- Othello chooses Cassio for lieutenant instead of him (1.1.8-19). It is true that Iago is jealous of Cassio's appointed position

Selthofner 2 as lieutenant, especially after Iago's loyalty to Othello in spite of his racism. However, these reasons are merely a boast to cover his insecurity. Romantic jealousy catalyses Iago's passionate hatred of Othello and Cassio, for he thinks they have slept with his wife Emelia. His envy of their masculine spheres of life, such as career, is merely a cover for, and extension of, his romantic jealousy. Iago remains quiet about his suspicions of adultery because he is cuckolded, and thus less than his wife, which is embarrassing in a misogynistic society. One can relate to Iago's dulled portrayal of his true vulnerabilities: the masculine sphere holds more noble reasons for rage; to be weak or less than is a feminine quality. Even if Iago verbally embraced his romantic jealousy, he would not converse with Emelia about it -- in disgust of seeming less than her, the problem would remain. The problem lies in his destructive way of handling his romantic jealousy. Hiding behind masculine reasons for anger, and refusing to communicate with women, he fears giving up the societal masculine upper hand.

Iago's first soliloquy at the end of Act 1 Scene 3, provides great insight into how his misogyny sparks jealousy and leads to manipulation. He begins by emphasizing how he relishes in power by saying, "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse," indicating he is willing to manipulate people for money or personal gain (1.3.373). Money is a hyper-masculine type of power in a time where few women have money, and so is the military position Iago feels entitled to. Iago finally reveals he believes Emelia is adulterous, by saying "I hate the Moor, And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets He's done my office" (1.3.375-377). Shakespeare uses double meaning with 'office' conveying both that he was snubbed of his military position, and that rumors say Othello slept with Emelia, hiding behind masculine legality (misogynistically more appealing than romantic jealousy) once more. Iago sexistly denies Emelia of power here, blaming the affair on Othello. His misogyny sparks jealousy of Othello, rather than of Emelia --

thus he devises a plan to manipulate Othello into the same cuckoldesque jealousy he is experiencing. Iago reveals his plan to convince Othello that Cassio slept with Desdemona (1.3.385). Iago's manipulation includes his planned sacrifice of Desdemona, misogynistically projecting hatred of Emilia's infidelity onto her. Iago's savior complex (a form of misogyny where men see it as their job to save women) also comes into play, feeding his male ego -- Iago feels he is saving Desdemona from being with Othello, an adulterous man. Either way, Iago's manipulation denies Desdemona of agency in her own relationship. Similarly, Iago denies Emilia agency, giving the power backhandedly to Othello by choosing to manipulate him instead of Emilia. Even other men hold more power in a heterosexual relationship than the woman, which provides opportunities for romantic jealousy that lead to Iago's manipulation.

By painting Othello as both feminine and disliked, Shakespeare is also commenting on the hypocrisy of men in having these qualities yet still berating women for them. In Act 2 Scene 1, Iago performs another soliloquy, where he reiterates that he thinks Othello has slept with Emilia (2.1.286-287). Then, Iago finally reveals he believes Cassio has also slept with Emilia: "(For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too)" (2.1.298). Nightcap refers both to the vagina, and to his wife, but could also be read to allude to Cassio wearing Iago's career-related hat of lieutenant. Shakespeare uses parentheticals, ambiguity, and delayed reveal to emphasize Iago's intentional diminishment of his suspicion. Iago methodically gains doses of sympathy from the audience through these subtly intertwined confessions of romantic jealousy. His small spurts of vulnerability amidst a cold demeanor are more charismatic than Othello's outward expression of emotion to a misogynistic audience. Othello's proclamations of romantic jealousy are frowned upon, both because Iago discourages the audience from liking him, and because he displays stereotypical feminine qualities. Othello is too emotional, and his continual self-degradation

reflects a quality men expect out of overly-emotional females. These qualities are brought forth by Iago's manipulation, and drive Othello to murder-suicide. Shakespeare is unveiling misogyny: Selthofner 4 Iago manipulates Othello into a 'feminine' state of heightened emotion -- correlating femininity with madness, erraticism, and easy manipulation. Furthermore, these qualities are demonstrated on a man rather than a woman in this play: Shakespeare is conveying that women lack agency to the severity that they can't even display their stereotyped emotiveness. Iago ascribes these feminine qualities onto Othello, even though they also lie hidden within himself. They are two sides of the same coin: no matter if one is an 'Iago' or an 'Othello,' one's problems will not resolve until women are given agency in the matter.

When Emilia displays wisdom, she is seen as adulterous by Iago. The audience witnesses situations that Iago may regard as proof of infidelity. Firstly, Cassio kisses Emilia in greeting and Iago gets offended (2.1.98-99). Iago then refuses to let Emilia speak for herself, because he thinks Emilia is taunting him by taking power in their relationship in spite of her 'adulterous' behavior. Later, when the audience hears Desdemona confide in Emilia, she asks her if she would cheat on Iago (4.3.63). Emilia answers "The world's a huge thing: it is a great price for a small vice," whereas Desdemona says that she would not (4.3.64). Though speculation is by no means proof, Othello, and men in general, hold 'the world's power' in this play. While the audience, and Iago, may interpret this as adultery, Emilia is rather simply taking agency in the male dominated world. Emilia says "They [men] are all but stomachs, and we all but food; They eat us hungerly, and when they are full They belch us" (3.4.100-103). Emilia shows us that to be a wise woman (aware of misogyny) is to be painted as adulterous, or evil. However, Shakespeare is conveying that even if a woman is as truly innocent as Desdemona, she does not have the agency to stop men from believing otherwise.

While Emelia is aware of the violent male world they are subjected to, she fights for Iago's love nevertheless. In the handkerchief scene, Emelia's loyalties to her husband Iago, and to her mistress Desdmona, conflict with one another. Iago had urged Emelia to steal the handkerchief many times, but refuses to tell Emelia why he wants it -- showing he trusts the audience more than his wife. Iago's value of his wife is determined by her ability to serve him: Iago first calls her a "foolish wife," but upon her deliverance of the handkerchief, she is called a "good wench" (3.3.307; 3.3.317). Societally, men value women based on their ability to please them and push their personal agenda. To protect Iago, when Desdmona is confronted about losing the handkerchief, Emelia does not own up to taking it. Emelia asks "Is not this man jealous?" to Desdmona, revealing Emelia is aware of Othello's jealousy, and presumably Iago's jealousy as well (3.4.96). Both women are aware of the men's problems, but forbidden from initiating confrontation and condemned to blind hope in change. She tries to help Desdmona in her response, and please Iago in her silence: Shakespeare mirrors society in that a woman lacks agency to solve problems, only able to console other women and blindly please male fantasies.

Although Iago remains alive at the end of the play, Emelia and Desdmona die in unity, while Iago and Othello have pushed away everyone who could care for them -- portraying the downfalls of misogyny for men and women alike. Spurring Emelia's murder, Iago blames Emelia's supposed infidelity for his vengeful rage, finally saying the truth. Talking to Emelia, he says "This is the fruits of whoring" (5.1.115). He takes responsibility but denies fault, a unique privilege of the male psyche that admonished Iago of guilt throughout the play. Once Iago blamed her for his crimes, she realized her forced complacency in his villainy, and Emelia confesses to taking the handkerchief: she says "...that handkerchief thou speak'st of I found by fortune, and did give my husband... He begged of me to steal't" (5.2.224-228). When the fault is

deflected back to Iago, especially by the 'adulterous' Emelia, he becomes so enraged he stabs his own wife. She dies while singing the Willow song, a bond between her and Desdemona -- a sign of female unity amidst defeat. Emelia and Desdemona's forced naivety with their partners gives them the emotional space to truly bond with one another, albeit over shared trauma. Iago, on the other hand, projects his trauma onto Othello, wreaking havoc and violence affecting all involved. Shakespeare leaves only Iago alive. He says "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know; From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.301-302). Iago has nothing left to say: it was easier to kill his wife, and inadvertently Desdemona, Othello, and Rodrigo, with plans to kill Cassio, than it was to be vulnerable and communicate with his wife. Iago remains alive, unscathed, and finally silent, Shakespeare's testament to the patriarchal ability to make others bear the burden of one's own damages.

Audiences and societies relate to the pains of faltered communication in a misogynistic relationship, but it will never be confronted head-on. Iago's shame of his own jealousy is more easily projected onto Othello than it is addressed within Iago's relationship with Emelia. Psychologically, people are prone to projecting their traumas onto those around them -- it takes equality and humility to realize the faults you see in others are merely a mirror of your own insecurities. Further destruction of misogyny is needed to address the root of those problems with a partner. In a patriarchal society, a female partner is depersonalized -- lacking agency except in their consolation with fellow women. The easiest option for men is projection and the inevitable destruction of those around them. Shakespeare mirrors misogynistic society, a culturally relevant and personally relatable display.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by Stanley Wells and Michael Neill, Oxford University Press, 2008.