

AQA English Literature A-level

Othello: Character Profiles

Emilia

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EMILIA

THE 'FALLEN WOMAN'

INTRODUCTION

Emilia is Iago's **wife** and Desdemona's **maid**, **friend**, and unofficial advisor. The first thing we learn about her is that it's rumoured she had an affair with Othello: this rumour is cause enough for Iago to hatch his cunning plan. Because of this, it can be argued Emilia is one catalyst for the events of the play. The fact it is her **sexuality** - and only a **rumour**, at that - which motivates Iago is indicative of how women were viewed at the time. We never find out if this accusation is true, rendering the question of her innocence **irrelevant**. Just as Desdemona's innocence doesn't save her from Othello's murderous anger, Emilia's guilt or innocence holds little bearing on Iago's actions. The affront to Iago's masculine pride is sufficient. In the end, Emilia is killed by her husband for betraying him not physically, but **mentally**: she exposes his lies and speaks out against him. The 'fallen woman' falls, literally, at the hands of her morally fallen husband. With this **violent** end to Emilia's life, Shakespeare demands of his audience: is it right that a woman be **murdered** for adultery, regardless of her guilt?

Emilia is used as a **pawn** by Iago in his **psychological** warfare against Othello: he blames her **alleged** adultery for his actions and uses her to steal Desdemona's handkerchief. Despite this, Shakespeare doesn't portray her as a mindless, passive **victim**. As a character, she is headstrong, **assertive**, and complex, with conflicting loyalties and motivations. It is her duty to obey Iago, and it appears she craves attention from him, but equally she is **loyal** to her friend Desdemona. Through the course of the play, we watch her navigate these contradictions of character before finally pledging **allegiance** to Desdemona over her husband. Furthermore, Emilia typically acts as the voice of reason within the cast. Her **observations** are astute and **progressive**, as she calls out **injustice** and prejudice as she sees it. She anticipates that lies and manipulation are occurring even before Iago's plan reaches its conclusion, regularly grounding the play back in reality. This contrasts with the other characters' **delusions** and **hysteria**. Her proclivity for truth-telling gets her killed, making her a **martyr** for justice and equality.

In many plays on the theme of **disloyal** wives, the wife's eventual death at the hands of her husband is intended as a warning for women: do not **betray** your husband. Death was **conventionally** portrayed as a just punishment for infidelity, and audiences were welcomed to cast judgement on the slain woman. This is not the case in *Othello*: Shakespeare maintains **powerful** audience respect for Emilia as she works to undo her husband's **destruction**. Her role as a heroine by the play's conclusion is **unambiguous**. Emilia's fate at the hands of her husband identifies her with the host of Shakespearean women who suffer from male **aggression** or **neglect**, such as Ophelia in *Hamlet*. But, as stated above, this treatment of his female characters doesn't equate with the belief that they deserve such a **fate**; with each female death comes a profound message about the **erasure** of women in patriarchal society. Though she dies, Emilia is not a passive victim: as noted above, she is martyred for her **dedication** to the female cause.



The **friendship** between Emilia and Desdemona is a **pillar** upon which Shakespeare's plot is built. There is a bond that is tested by social expectations and cultural barriers but overcomes them. The **exchanges** they share allow us, the audience, to hear the female perspective of what is happening on stage, and allow Shakespeare to explore a whole other **worldview**. Their friendship is a symbol, primarily, for female **solidarity**, but also for honesty, class conflict, and the universality of women's experiences. Shakespeare demonstrates the differences between the two women: Desdemona is naive and obediently loyal, whereas Emilia is **experienced**, cynical, and **unsentimental**. Emilia is Desdemona's inferior but guides her through her marriage, offering wisdom and comfort; their friendship is the most **honest** and faithful of all we see in the text. The women have different backgrounds and social standings but both are killed by their husbands, suggesting all women are united in their experience of male **violence**.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **The Jaded Housewife:** From the start, Iago and Emilia's **marriage** doesn't seem to be one made in heaven, and Emilia's character fits accordingly: she is quietly resentful, telling Iago, "**You shall not write my praise,**" (**Act 2 Scene 1**), but she is powerless to stop his jibes or escape the relationship. Iago constantly insults and mocks her, saying she talks "**too much**" (**Act 2 Scene 1**) and that she is "**foolish**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**). Emilia's **passive** reaction implies she is used to such treatment and has **surrendered** herself to it. Her bitterness towards her husband finally manifests in her scene with Desdemona in **Act 4 Scene 3**, as her hostility and distrust of all men becomes clear. Her cynical view of marriage, a result of her **bleak** experience with it, contrasts sharply with Desdemona's **idealistic** union with Othello at the start of the play; as Desdemona's faith in Othello starts to wane, Emilia is there to empathise and attest to the many failings of holy matrimony. In the end, Emilia is the only one who can bring Iago down and expose his lies; she was the only one he **underestimated** and neglected in his plans, even though, as his wife, she should have been the one he knew best of all. Finally, Emilia is able to channel all her **resentment** into something good by putting an end to his lies.
- **The Jilted Lover:** Despite Iago's **mistreatment** of her and his obvious **disinterest** in her, Emilia seems eager to please him. Part of her loyalty and obedience may come from her **duty** to him as his wife, but in her sole soliloquy, she explains, "**I nothing but to please his fantasy,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**), suggesting there is a part of her that still craves affection and attention from her husband. As a result, for the first half of the play, Emilia appears to be pathetically submissive to her husband's **desires**, doing as he wishes without asking for justification. She appears to be just another pawn in Iago's master plan, and we perhaps may even view her as **complicit** in it. However, her confidence and voice build, and she starts taking control. She unknowingly sees through her husband's guise, correctly predicting some "**villainous knave**" has turned Othello against Desdemona for **personal** gain (**Act 4 Scene 2**); you may believe she has repressed her suspicions of her husband, or that she truly doesn't suspect him until it is too late. Either way, it is only once the full extent of Iago's **wickedness** comes to light that Emilia is able to reject him. Even then, she has to ask Othello multiple times, "**My husband?**" (**Act 5 Scene 2**) before she accepts the terrible truth. We can see that she holds some **affection** or love for Iago that has blinded her to his **true nature**.



- **The Loyal Friend:** Another way that Shakespeare challenges our first impression of Emilia as the submissive wife and **unwitting** accomplice is through her fierce loyalty to Desdemona. When Othello's mood sours and Desdemona loses her assertive spirit, Emilia **steps** up to defend her friend. She isn't afraid to **defy** men - her superiors - to do so, telling Othello, "**I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest, / Lay down my soul at stake,**" (Act 4 Scene 2) when all he wants to hear is that his wife is **guilty** of adultery. Similarly, she challenges her husband's **dismissal** of Desdemona's tears, saying, "**Would it not make one weep?**" (Act 4 Scene 2). She is willing to risk her own **safety** to stand up for her friend, and this is put to the test in the final scene of the play. Alone, **confronted** with her friend's murder, and knowing that Othello is dangerous and capable of murdering her, too, she still chooses to raise the **alarm**: "**Help! help! ho, help! / The Moor hath killed my mistress,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). She dies so that she can clear Desdemona's name of guilt; as she dies, she requests, "**Lay me by my mistress' side,**" (Act 5 Scene 2), choosing her **friendship** over her marriage once and for all.
- **The Martyr:** Emilia is killed because she is **unfazed** by authority and isn't afraid to speak out against **injustice**. Frequently, she tells men truths they don't want to hear, such as telling Othello that his wife is honest, and in the end, she pays the **price** with her life. Her dying words, "**So speaking as I think, I die, I die,**" (Act 5 Scene 2), suggest she has sacrificed her life for truth and honesty, as Shakespeare welcomes the comparison to a martyr - someone who is killed for the sake of a **greater** cause. Typically, a martyr is called on religious grounds, and the religious themes surrounding Emilia's character don't end here. Her decision to steal the handkerchief for Iago is revealed to have fatal consequences, and she comes to this terrible realisation on stage: "**Thou has not half that power to do me harm / As I have to be hurt [...] O villainy! / I thought so then; I'll kill myself for grief,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). From this point on, Emilia is on a mission to atone herself of her sin and set her actions right. While Desdemona is murdered as an innocent victim, Emilia's death is an act of repentance. Her **devotion** to her dead friend can, in this way, be compared to **religious** faith.
- **The Voice of Reason:** Emilia remains a pragmatist throughout the play, even as everyone around her **descends** into delusion and **panic**. Her cynical, long-suffering view of the world makes her singularly astute and wise, to the point that she is able to predict the whole plot of the play: "**I'll be hanged if some eternal villain, / [...] To get some office, / Have not devised this slander,**" (Act 4 Scene 2). She sees the world as a corrupt, unjust place; she believes marriage is a farce and is **distrusting** of men, thinking them to be jealous, irrational, and perverse. None of the events in the play prove her wrong, as bleak as her perspective is. However wise she is, though, she has no autonomy or **influence** over the play's outcome: she is a woman, an adulteress, a maid, and so she goes unlistened to. Only Desdemona listens to her: the women have a close bond, with Emilia - the older, more experienced woman - offering advice and insights to the ingenue Desdemona. It is because of Emilia that we, the audience, get to cut through the noise of **patriarchal narrative** and listen to the female perspective. We find an ally in Emilia because she voices the outrage we feel and is able to act on it. Arguably, she is Shakespeare's **spokesperson** in the play; perhaps more importantly, she is a conduit, a vessel through which the audience can find catharsis and satisfaction despite their helplessness to what happens on stage.



EXAM TIP: Typicality

Considering the typicality of a text is a good way to ensure you are considering both context and the author's intentions.

If a text is typical of its era, what are the cultural and contextual influences that make these attributes so emblematic of the period? For example, presenting a female character as weak might be typical of literature because of the legal rights of women at the time, and the resulting cultural perspective. If an author has written something atypical, why have they done this? What message are they trying to convey by challenging these trends?

In an exam, making sure you consider typicality with every point you make is a quick way to include a lot of the AOs.

RELATIONSHIPS

Iago | Emilia's marriage to Iago is an **unhappy** one. You could argue that, as a result, Shakespeare presents us with a typical union of the era. Iago has no respect for his wife - for her autonomy, her wishes, or her intelligence - and takes any **opportunity** to humiliate her or manipulate her. Emilia seems largely unscathed by her husband's verbal abuse, accepting it as a part of life and **knowing** her attempts to defend herself will go unheard. She suspects him of villainy but appears to repress her **doubts**, perhaps because she is unwilling to **acknowledge** that she is married to a wicked man. Otherwise, Shakespeare depicts her love-hate attitude towards her husband: at times resenting him bitterly, at others doing whatever she can to please him. It's possible that even Emilia herself isn't sure where her love ends and her feeling of **obligation** as a wife begins.

We don't learn much about what Iago and Emilia's marriage was like prior to the events of the play, though Iago's shameless misogyny and Emilia's subservience to him implies it was a loveless one. In contrast, when Iago cites Othello's alleged **affair** with Emilia as cause for his fury, we are led to believe Iago cares enough about his wife to be hurt by her infidelity. Shakespeare sets it up to seem like Iago intends to fight for his wife, but as he continues to plot and **conspire**, it's clear he cares more about his pride and masculinity than her.

Emilia and Iago's first interaction is in **Act 2**, symbolising the way she is an **afterthought** to Iago. When the two talk, Iago takes the opportunity to harangue and mock her, going on to denounce women as a whole. Emilia is a **scapegoat** to him, someone to blame for his problems, and an easy **target**: he takes out his anger and misogyny on her, and as his dutiful wife, she is to take it quietly. Contrary to Iago's expectations, Emilia does assert herself and criticise his cruel remarks, hinting at the **discontent** she has been feeling for a while. Despite this, her actions are still those of a subservient wife: she chooses to steal the handkerchief for him, though she doesn't know what he intends to do with it and suspects malice. She explains, "**I nothing but to please his fantasy,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**), meaning she is **desperate** to impress him and wants to make him happy. This implies she has long been neglected by her husband, and must place his needs and happiness above her own.

There are a few ways to interpret Iago and Emilia's marriage at this point. While it is quite obvious Iago is taking advantage of her, using her as a **pawn** in his game, Emilia's feelings



aren't as clearcut. Possibly, she truly loves him, and chooses to prioritise his desires. She may be **desperate** for his attention, and so willing to do whatever it takes to get it. Alternatively, she may feel obliged to do as he asks, pressured by convention and the ideal of the obliging, subservient wife put forward by Venetian society. Either way, Shakespeare uses their relationship to show how women's **identities** were erased in marriage.

It is Emilia's decision to defy her husband and expose his lies that changes the course of the plot, ensuring Iago is arrested for his crimes. Her **courage** to speak out against him, going against her instinct to "obey" him (**Act 5 Scene 2**), shows how freedom of speech can **liberate** women. Moreover, when Emilia does defy Iago, it is to defend Desdemona and attest to her innocence: a show of female **solidarity** against male oppression, showing how one woman's bravery and defiance can liberate others.

AO5: Iago's Murder of Emilia

"Emilia is **not killed by Iago alone** [...]. The other men present, by their **inaction, literally create the space** [...] wherein a wife can be killed by her husband. [...] Even though it is evident by this time that Emilia is exposing Iago's guilt and is therefore in need of protection (like any state witness), **none of the men present makes a move to disarm Iago**. What we see on stage at this point is a lone unarmed woman surrounded by armed men who deliberately fail to protect her - a **visual presentation of the defenselessness of a wife**. [When Othello tries to stab Iago] Montano immediately disarms Othello with the result that Iago is able to kill Emilia and run away. What we see in this piece of stage business is two people being simultaneously assaulted - one a murderer, the other the woman who has exposed him. He is armed, she unarmed. And, in this moment, **the man who intervenes does so to save the murderer, not his victim.**" - Ruth Vanita, 'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

Emilia | Supposedly, Emilia is Desdemona's maid or servant, but it is clear the two are close friends. Their **friendship** defies traditional structures of class, showing that love can successfully transcend **social barriers**. Parallels are drawn between the two women's marriages; their husbands, by the end of the play, are both driven by sexual jealousy and **anger**. Emilia is the more experienced of the two women. Her marriage has already collapsed, and her husband no longer cares for her - if he ever did. Therefore, her unhappy marriage juxtaposes with Desdemona's **blissful union** in the opening acts, while acting as a prophecy for how Othello and Desdemona's marriage will sour by the play's end.

This is reflected in how Emilia's **grounded realism** and cynicism contrasts with Desdemona's youthful, naive optimism. She acts as Desdemona's counsel and guide, exposing her to the harsh reality of marriage in a patriarchal society. She predicts the chaos and suffering that results from **jealousy's** introduction into a relationship. Moreover, she purposefully defies tradition in her views towards adultery, whereas Desdemona swears loyalty to her husband. To some, Emilia may appear as the more pragmatic, cold-hearted of the pair, while others may interpret her character as more progressive and **sexually liberated**. Either way, her views and life experiences make her the perfect friend for Desdemona. She is able to empathise with her and comfort her as she undergoes the trauma of losing her husband to jealousy. As Desdemona loses her voice to **self doubt**, faced with her husband's **inexplicable** anger, Emilia doesn't hesitate to stand up for her. When Desdemona is murdered, it is Emilia who exposes her husband's lies and **advocates** for her friend's innocence. The women pledge allegiance to each other over their husbands, and lay next to each other in death. This shows the power of female solidarity.

All of this means that the **sororal** bond between Desdemona and Emilia is likely the truest, most honest relationship out of all those in the play. Their conversations lack the mind games and ulterior motives of other **exchanges**. The only deceit comes when Emilia steals the handkerchief for Iago. She does this under the influence of her husband: it is his suggestion,



and it is her duty to honour him. Therefore, one can argue that the only **treachery** in their relationship is man-made. Shakespeare argues that female solidarity is threatened only by external, male **influence**, which taints the purity and love of female friendship.

AO5: Emilia & Desdemona's deaths

"Emilia's death at her husband's hands is again **attributable to the onlookers' nonintervention**. This is one of the rare cases where wife-murder is represented as **occurring because Emilia is "unfaithful" not sexually but mentally**.

She breaks faith with Iago by choosing to be loyal to Desdemona rather than to him. The dramatic **presentation of the two murders as parallels sharply undercuts the dominant ideology that legitimised the murder of an adulterous wife.**" - Ruth Vanita, 'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

Once Emilia understands the awful **consequences** of her actions and that she has betrayed her friend, she **commits** her life to putting it right. Her dying act, to expose her husband and clear her friend's name, is one of loyalty and of atonement. She dies for her sins - but not the conventional sins one would expect an **'unfaithful'** wife to die for. She dies because she betrayed her friend and allowed male influence to interfere with their bond, a choice that she regrets painfully.

Othello | Emilia and Othello's relationship is founded on the **traditional duality** of master and servant. Othello is Emilia's superior, not just as a man but as a high-ranking military officer, and we see this in Emilia's **deferential** treatment of him. However, at the same time, Emilia has access to Othello's private life by way of her friendship with Desdemona. Most of Othello's 'subjects' don't have access to this knowledge, and as Emilia passes judgement on Othello's private character, their dynamic strays away from the traditional.

At first, Emilia seems to truly respect and admire Othello. She has no reason to **dislike** him, and he is her mistress' husband. On the other hand, her first allegiance is to her mistress, whom she wants to be happy. Her general **distrust** of men manifests when she asks Desdemona if Othello might be jealous; her suspicion is proved right, and her opinion of Othello declines rapidly. She sees Desdemona's pain **firsthand** and shares in it. Iago and Othello treat women as scapegoats for their own insecurity and discontent, and Shakespeare contrasts this with Emilia's view of Othello. Iago and Othello's prejudices are **nebulous** and generalised, finding figureheads in their allegedly unfaithful wives, whereas Emilia's growing hostility towards Othello is fully justified and personal. She understands the threat women face from abusive men, and now this **nightmare** is happening to her closest friend.



EXAM TIP: Author Intentions with Form

In the drama form, *who* a character interacts with on stage can be just as important as how they interact with them. Notice that Emilia doesn't have many meaningful relations in the text. Why might this be? What might Shakespeare be trying to say about the role of women in society, and what kinds of social lives they lived?

Othello, on the other hand, never seems to pay attention to Emilia until it **serves** him. He goes to her and asks about Desdemona's relationship with Cassio because he is seeking third-party validation. When Emilia **refuses** to give him what he wants, he gets angry and dismisses her testimony for the simple reason that she is a woman who isn't telling him what he **wants** to hear.

Emilia is the only other woman we see Othello properly interact with. The vast majority of these interactions take place after Othello's **transformation**; as a result, Emilia becomes a target for Othello's women-hating. He refers to her as a brothel-keeper and a whore, illustrating his belief that all women are sexual, **deceitful** beings. He believes Emilia and Desdemona are colluding together against the men in their lives. This is an **extension** of his belief that all women conspire to cause men ill.

In the end, Emilia is the one who **exposes** Iago's plots and convinces Othello of Desdemona's innocence. Othello's tale of female **solidarity** is confirmed, but not in the way he once thought: Emilia defends Desdemona when no one else will, **exonerating** her and forcing Othello to examine his own actions.

KEY THEMES

Because Emilia is a female character written by Shakespeare to serve a purpose, every **decision** he makes regarding her can be interpreted through the '**presentation of femininity**'. Plus, most of the

characters in the play - and Shakespeare's contemporary audience - don't look past her gender, meaning her actions are **received** in the context of what people believe it means to be '**feminine**'. Her identity is inherently feminine; therefore, we will explore the different facets of femininity that Shakespeare explores, and how they **intersect** with other themes in the play.

The purpose of Emilia's character as a construct goes beyond a commentary on **femininity**, **misogyny**, and violence against women, though these are very significant ideas. Frequently, she subverts the expectations of her fellow characters in the play and those of the audience; for example, by advocating for **adultery** and by exposing Iago's wickedry. In this way, she revolts against conformity and indoctrination as a whole: she exposes the various **farces** and delusions that people operate on. Her views towards sexuality challenge religious doctrines. She astutely

AO5: The Other

The Other is a **prominent term in literary theory**, used in the study of the **timeless theme of binary oppositions** - man/woman, coloniser/colonised, good/evil. The Other is any individual who doesn't 'belong' with the group because of some fundamental difference (in the group's opinion). A stranger becomes the Other. The Other is **the opposite of the Self**, and so **represents everything unfamiliar** to us. The concept of the Other is a **big part of many literary schools of thought**, including psychoanalysis and postcolonialism.

In imperial cultures, **Othering establishes power imbalances** between the colonised and the coloniser. This allows false binary divisions, such as social class, race, or gender, to endure. The Other is a **symbol of the oppressed and the repressed**.



observes the ways in which her **culture** routinely, systemically oppresses women, promoting progressive, feminist ideals. As such, she symbolises a **progressive** future free from conservative **restrictions**. Her mere existence and identity threaten the hegemony of white masculinity, and so she is **silenced** by her oppressors.

Female Solidarity

Shakespeare uses the **sororal bond** between Desdemona and Emilia to illustrate the importance of solidarity between women in a patriarchal society. The relationship between the two of them is the only one in the play to endure until the very end, making it the **purest**, truest **form of love** we see; in addition, their interactions are the only we see between women. Their relationship has many **facets**; Emilia comforts Desdemona when Othello is cruel to her, as well as mentoring her on the harsh reality of the world around them. The only **meaningful** relationships open to women that weren't **fraught** with danger were those with other women: if they appeared too close to another man, they would be **accused** of infidelity. We see this in the **comfort** and strength Desdemona draws from Emilia's company. Though the two women are of different social classes, their friendship **transcends** rank; similarly, they both are murdered by their husbands, showing that women are equal in the face of domestic violence.

Emilia educates Desdemona on male **jealousy** and cuckoldry, explaining, **"They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full / They belch us," (Act 3 Scene 4)**. The metaphor compares **sexual desire** to gluttony, insinuating men seek **satisfaction** and view women as merely a means to an end. Furthermore, they **objectify** women as **"food"**, and to **"eat"** them hints at the violence and aggression underlying male-female relationships. This unequivocal **denouncement** of masculinity is presented in contrast to Desdemona's unshakable love, as she explains, **"My love doth so approve him / That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns [...] / Have grace and favour in them," (Act 4 Scene 3)**. Her unwavering love, her ability to take Othello for better and for worse, may appear romantic and **gracious** - particularly in the eyes of a Shakespeare's contemporary, Christian audience - but in this context, the **"grace and favour"** she sees in him puts her at serious **risk**. She loves her oppressor. Because of this, Emilia's down-to-earth **cynicism** and wisdom aim to protect Desdemona from the men in her life. Shakespeare argues the only people who can save women from **male violence** are other women.

When all the men have **abandoned** Desdemona to her fate, believing Othello's word over hers or simply choosing not to interfere in **marital affairs**, Emilia advocates for her friend and, in the end, exonerates her of guilt. Desdemona's bond with Emilia is the only thing **protecting** her from complete **loneliness** or slander. When Iago tells Desdemona to stop crying, Emilia protests, **"Hath she forsook [...] her father, and her country, and her friends, / To be called whore? Would it not make one weep?" (Act 4 Scene 2)**. This depicts Emilia as the only person capable of **empathising** with Desdemona and understanding the great sacrifice she has made in order to be with Othello. Moreover, Shakespeare demonstrates how the only **reward** women were given for their devotion to men was abuse. Emilia also hints at the hypocrisy behind Othello's **accusation**: Desdemona defied her father to be with Othello, and now he is using that same deceit against her as **proof** that she could deceive him, too.

Iago dismisses Desdemona's fears by telling her, **"'Tis but his humour. / The business of the state does him offence, / And he does chide with you," (Act 4 Scene 2)**, showing how



women's feelings were **trivialised** and not taken seriously. Emilia disagrees, declaring, **"I will be hanged if some eternal villain, / [...] To get some office, / Have not devised this slander [...] Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company? / What place, what time, what form, what likelihood? / The Moor's abused by some villainous knave,"** (Act 4 Scene 2). Ironically, she has successfully **guessed** exactly what is going on, though she is oblivious that her husband is the **"villainous knave"** in question. Her **outrage** on Desdemona's behalf shows a woman defending another in the face of men's **indifference**. Her passion is conveyed in the phrase, **"I will be hanged"** as this shows Emilia is willing to lay down her life for Desdemona, and also indicates that Emilia shares in Desdemona's **pain**.

This idea echoes Emilia's previous show of **loyalty**, when she says to Othello, **"To wager she is honest, / Lay down my soul at stake,"** (Act 4 Scene 2); and again, when she accuses him over her friend's **body**, **"The more angel she, and you the blacker devil!"** (Act 5 Scene 2). Emilia is willing to defy male authority to stand up for her friend. She bravely **accuses** him of murder: **"The Moor hath killed my mistress"** (Act 5 Scene 2). Similarly, she decides to defy her husband even though **"'tis proper [she] obey him,"** (Act 5 Scene 2), and says, **"Let heaven, and men, and devils, let them all [...] / Cry shame against me, yet I'll speak,"** (Act 5 Scene 2). Shakespeare shows a woman willing to **risk** her reputation and her marriage for her friend's good name. Her duty to Desdemona is stronger than her duty to her husband, the one she is supposed to **"obey"**. In this way, female solidarity **transcends** and overpowers all over loyalties and duties demanded of women by their society.

The unerring bond between the two women is embodied in their deaths. When Emilia is **stabbed** by Iago, she tells the onlookers, **"Lay me by my mistress' side,"** (Act 5 Scene 2). As it was tradition for husband and wife to be **buried** together, Emilia's decision to lie next to Desdemona in death - for eternity - symbolises her **commitment** to her over her husband. She pledges loyalty to her friend and rejects her husband, finally liberating them both from **marital violence**. Her dying words once more attest to Desdemona's innocence: **"She was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor; / [...] As I speak true; / So speaking as I think, I die, I die,"** (Act 5 Scene 2). This presents **female solidarity** as the whole, **uncorrupted** truth. The cost, Shakespeare demonstrates, of female solidarity and advocacy in the face of male reproach is death. The image of the two women dead on the marital bed carries **profound** meaning; it symbolises the way women are treated equally in death and in oppression, while also displaying **female friendships** as the ultimate bond, the safe haven from male violence, the union that survives longer than marriage.

The Female Perspective on Cuckoldry

Shakespeare presents us with an **unconventional**, radical perspective on Desdemona's alleged adultery through the character of Emilia. Whereas Desdemona has the **traditional**, expected reaction of **blaming** herself for Othello's treatment of her, Emilia condemns Othello and men as a whole for their fragile pride. This would have been particularly **shocking** for Shakespeare's contemporaries, as Jacobean England revered **masculinity** as the infallible authority. Emilia sees her friend's **confusion** and comforts her; thus, Shakespeare encourages the audience to take her lead and sympathise with Desdemona. This defies the traditional demonisation of **unfaithful** wives.



Emilia **exposes** the treatment of women as something **destructive** and entrenched in lust. She believes, **“They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, / They belch us,”** (Act 3 Scene 4), implying **jealousy** and greed are in a man’s nature. Shakespeare depicts Emilia’s resignation to the reality of male jealousy, depicting it as a cruel **inevitability** in the play. The metaphor **“When they are full, / They belch us”** shows how men view women as objects to be used to fulfil their **desires**, to make them **“full”**, and when they **“belch”** them the **cycle** starts afresh. Women have worth, Shakespeare illustrates, only as long as they can satisfy men. The **conceit** of food and appetite to represent sexual desire connotes aggression and commodification of the female form. The **parallel** structure of **“They are all but stomachs and we all but food”** implies there is an inherent **difference** between men and women that can’t be **overcome**: in this patriarchal society, men are **“all but stomachs”**, reducing them to their **sexual appetite**, while women are **“all but food”**, so exist only to **appease** and satiate.

Emilia’s response to the **oversexualisation** of women is to portray the relationship between men and women as a necessarily sexual one. She advocates for women’s own sexual desire, and argues women only need men to **satisfy** these desires, using them as sexual objects just as men use women. She says, **“Say that they slack their duties / And pour our treasures into foreign laps,”** (Act 4 Scene 3), portraying husbands’ duty to satisfy their wives. This inverts the traditional standard that wives must satisfy their husbands and **empowers** women by **entitling** them to their own sexuality and desire. Moreover, this condemns men for committing adultery in the same way women are judged. Therefore, this statement exposes the **hypocrisy** and double standards surrounding sexuality. She continues, **“Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them [...] And have not we affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?”** (Act 4 Scene 3). She argues that if men are allowed to be **unfaithful** because they have these innate weaknesses of **“affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty,”** then women should be **vindicated** for the same reason. Emilia insinuates that women use men the same way men use women: this implies there is no possibility for **romance** or any sort of intellectual bond between men and women. Their **relationships** exist in the physical realm only. The **disparity** in their experiences is too vast to allow them to understand each other.

Emilia’s approach to cuckoldry and adultery is **pragmatic**, which contrasts with the irrational fear and humiliation with which men react to being cuckolded. When Desdemona asks her, **“Wouldst thou do such a deed [as adultery] for all the world?”**, Emilia responds, **“The world’s a huge thing; it is a great price / For a small vice,”** (Act 4 Scene 3). Her logic and calmness make Othello and Iago’s reactions to cuckoldry, in comparison, seem even more hysterical and **nonsensical**. This, coupled with Emilia calling cuckoldry **“a small vice”**, suggests the scandal and shame surrounding cuckoldry is a male **invention**. Shakespeare argues that cuckoldry is **arbitrarily** chosen as the ultimate sin by men because of their wounded pride. The reference to **“a great price”** connotes business, where a woman’s **body** is exchanged for **“all the world”**, and one may venture to interpret this as a subtle reference to prostitution. Prostitution is feared by patriarchal society because it undermines male ownership of women’s bodies, **empowering** women by giving them a place within the economic market. Here, we see Emilia support this by suggesting women are **entitled** to use their bodies as they wish and portraying sex as a business exploit. When she elaborates, **“Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?”** (Act 4 Scene 3), Shakespeare portrays Emilia as someone who prioritises **monetary power** over sexual power. The men in the play validate their authority through their sexual virility, whereas Emilia judges authority through



social **standing**, signifying a departure from the traditional hierarchy of society - with the nobility and the common folk - to an **economically liberated** one, within which women have power to control who is in charge.

While it is demonstrated, through the men's actions, that women were exclusively **blamed** for unfaithfulness, Emilia attributes the guilt to men alone. She claims, **"I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall [...] / The ills we do, their ills instruct us so," (Act 4 Scene 3)**. She argues that when men mistreat their wives, they **compel** them to betray them. This might imply that women follow men's examples, either unknowingly or on purpose, as a way to highlight the double standards in relationships. An alternative interpretation may be that Shakespeare exposes the **confinement** felt by women in marriage: they cannot leave the husbands who abuse them, so the only choice remaining is to be **unfaithful**, as a way to seek escape. Furthermore, by arguing that a cuckolded man must have committed adultery himself, Shakespeare implies that it is not cuckoldry that **weakens** men: a cuckold was already weak, to cheat on his wife and mistreat her. Emilia's statement **"It is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall"** proves to be more true than she or the audience can **appreciate** at the time: in the final scene, we watch both Emilia and Desdemona fall at the hands of their husbands. The comparison is emphasised when Gratiano says, **"The woman falls," (Act 5 Scene 2)**. Once more, Shakespeare is inverting a common **trope** by making Othello and Iago **culpable** in their wives' deaths, symbolically **corrupting** them. The 'fallen woman', traditionally, is someone who has strayed from her husband and from common decency as a result of her own sins and faults. Yet, here, the fallen women are innocent and have been slain by their husbands, who have fallen **morally**. Shakespeare illustrates that narratives surrounding sexuality and marriage are manipulated by men to exonerate them from **guilt** that is rightfully theirs.

AO5: Fallen Women

"The **spectacle of Desdemona and Emilia lying dead together is much more strongly suggestive of how great ladies and ordinary gentlewoman are equally defenseless** as wives, yet retain their dignity in death. [...]"

The **ultimate irony** in the play's representation of male-female relations is the fact that **two women accused by their husbands of "falling" morally**, actually fall not morally but physically, before our eyes, **felled by those morally "fallen" husbands' hands** and, symbolically, by the male-dominated society which endorses the murder of supposedly fallen women." - Ruth Vanita, 'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

Reputation

Reputation is hugely important in the world of Shakespeare's *Othello*. It is more important than the quality of your character or your achievements: how people **perceive** you and where they think you belong in the social **rankings** determines the life you lead, like a self-fulfilling prophecy. For women in particular, upholding a **respectable** reputation is **vital** for survival; in the Jacobean era, a good reputation was the difference between living among the higher echelons of society or living on the **streets**. Women could be **disinherited** and disowned for gaining a **tainted** reputation or for bringing down the reputation of their father or husband. In the character of Emilia, Shakespeare presents to us someone who is acutely aware of reputation's influence over people's behaviour. She understands reputation is the key to power, and that this



system is corrupt, vulnerable to **manipulation**. While we see how rumour and gossip destroy women's lives, Emilia dreams of exploiting reputation for her own **good**.

Through Emilia's character, Shakespeare demonstrates that reputation is a patriarchal tool used to control and **demean** women. Emilia remarks, "**The purest of their wives / Is foul as slander,**" (Act 4 Scene 2), identifying reputation as a departure from **reality**: it doesn't reflect a woman's true **nature**. The juxtaposition of "**purest**" and "**foul**" illustrates that no one is safe from the threat of a ruined reputation. A wife can be entirely obedient and honourable, yet still experience a fatal fall from **grace** because a man has decided it should be so. The threat of "**slander**" controls women because they must **fulfil** the demands of society perfectly, in order to avoid this terrible fate. Alternatively, Shakespeare shows how men define women through "**slander**": if a man believes a woman is "**foul**", she becomes "**foul**" in the perceptions of others, making it as good as true. Men **control** women by controlling their identities. Furthermore, men control reputation because their word isn't questioned; therefore, a woman's reputation is at the mercy of men's whims and **fancies**, meaning it "**follow[s] still the changes of the moon**" (Act 3 Scene 3) like jealousy does. Emilia's character identifies the tragedy of **womanhood**: that one can be innocent and still be disgraced. Women have no control over their lives: men control speech, so they control reputation, so they control power.

A significant **consequence** of reputation in the text is shown to be the issue of **cuckoldry**. A man's reputation depends on how authoritative and virile people perceive him to be, and these qualities are **undermined** if he has an unfaithful wife. Equally, a woman is **ostracised** from society if she is believed to have cuckolded her husband. When she learns that Othello called Desdemona "**whore**", Emilia says, "**I will be hanged if some eternal villain / [...] Have not devised this slander,**" (Act 4 Scene 2). This portrays the accusation of adultery as the malicious **fabrication** of men that wish women ill, rather than the **result** of a woman's own actions. She continues, "**Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company? / What place, what time, what form, what likelihood? / The Moor's abused by some villainous knave,**" (Act 4 Scene 2); she argues that Desdemona has given Othello no reason to **suspect** her of **infidelity**, and instead he believes her to be a whore from another man's word. Shakespeare shows how men can be **misled** through rumour and veiled insinuations. Women are powerless to this "**slander**", which plays to the paranoia of the **male ego**. Emilia's vehement **belief** that some man has planted the idea of Desdemona's betrayal in Othello's mind rather than believing that Desdemona betrayed Othello portrays cuckoldry as a male invention and a product of reputation's **social importance**. Shakespeare suggests that cuckoldry is sensationalised by gossip and scandal, meaning it is a social affair not a **private** one; men believe their wives are unfaithful from rumour, not from just cause. Therefore, he suggests cuckoldry is viewed as such an **awful**, sinful act because men want it to be perceived this way. If a man's reputation weren't dependent on his sexual power, cuckoldry wouldn't be so grievous an act. To be cuckolded is a **crisis** of social standing and **male pride**, not love; men can use their influence to **align** social perceptions with their own, protecting them from humiliation by forcing everyone else to be invested in their **masculinity**.

This concept is enforced further when Emilia asks, "**Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?**" (Act 4 Scene 3). This can be read as a rhetorical question, as it seems obvious no man - and no dutiful wife - would be willing to commit such an act. Yet, to Emilia, it is a fair exchange. While society places importance in not being a "**cuckold**" over becoming a "**monarch**", Emilia is **unaffected** by the male ego that demands



cuckoldry be avoided. Instead, she dreams of bigger things. In this question, Shakespeare shows how the **perception** of cuckoldry is defined by patriarchal narratives. The reputation of “**cuckold**” would be too damning to withstand, even if one were a “**monarch**”. The **exchange** Emilia posits welcomes a comparison between sexual power (“**cuckold**”) and traditional, **aristocratic** power (“**monarch**”), with the conclusion that, in Venetian society, the two are **mutually exclusive**: one cannot be a cuckold and a monarch.

Similarly, Emilia identifies that influence over **reputation** and social perception gives you power over reality and definition. When **justifying** to Desdemona why she would be unfaithful, she reasons, “**‘Tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right,**” (Act 4 Scene 3). Shakespeare illustrates that the **authorities**, the people in power, have the ability to decree what is “**right**” and wrong. Just as men make their own **infidelity** “**right**”, a woman could do the same in her own world. Taking this further, Shakespeare implies that the system of power and reputation is **corrupt** because it is vulnerable to selfish **desire** and delusion. Emilia wishes to take advantage of this in the hypothetical fantasy she suggests to Desdemona, envisioning a world where women can define their own **morality** and decide what is important to them.

Wifely Duties

In the text, Shakespeare explores what it means to be a ‘**good**’ wife, and whether these standards are compatible with autonomy and self-expression. Is it better to be obedient and **selfless**, or to be your own person and bring your own **desires** to a relationship? Both possibilities are presented, as Desdemona and Emilia try to balance their own **identities** with the identity of the ideal wife. At first, Othello admires Desdemona’s independence and spirit, but grows to **resent** her, even as she upholds the **traditional** expectations of a good wife. Similarly, Iago believes Emilia has failed him as his wife - he thinks she has cheated on him, that she talks too much, and that she doesn’t do enough to support his **ambitions**. The wives of *Othello* suffer abuse - mentally and physically - for their perceived wifely failings, bringing attention to the unjust **expectations** within marriage. A wife can be as doting and loyal as Desdemona, or as outspoken and cynical as Emilia, and still suffer the same **fate**.

Through Emilia’s character, Shakespeare examines the belief that women should be **seen** and not heard, especially when in the public sphere. Iago tells Cassio, “**Would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me / You would have enough,**” (Act 2 Scene 1). This portrays Emilia as the **nagging**, relentless wife, which implies women are undesirable if they speak too often. Iago is happy to mock Emilia publicly for this, showing how women are **demonised** for speaking their mind; plus, it demonstrates a way in which husbands control their wives, by publicly chastising them and humiliating them. **Belittling** them in this way results in women not **trusting** their own minds and **fearing** to speak out. Desdemona says, “**Alas, she has no speech,**” to which he responds, “**In faith, too much: / [...] Marry, before your ladyship, I grant / She puts her tongue a little in her heart and chides with thinking,**” (Act 2 Scene 1). This implies it is a wife’s **duty** to keep her **thoughts** to herself and, instead, echo their husbands’. Alternatively, this remark may allude to secret-keeping, foreshadowing Emilia’s **betrayal** of Iago at the play’s conclusion when she exposes his lies. It’s noteworthy that, during this exchange, the audience **hasn’t** heard Emilia speak at all, yet she is being berated for talking too much. This structural choice may be intended by Shakespeare to illustrate how men overestimate how much women speak: they think she has **spoken** too much,



when she has barely spoken at all. Moreover, Shakespeare argues that Emilia's identity as a wife **supplants** her individual identity; we hear what Iago thinks of her and her performance as his wife before we hear from her, thus establishing our first **impressions** through Iago's opinion.

The **vilification** of women who speak freely is particularly significant in the text's plot, as Iago's plan hinges on Emilia's willingness to keep quiet about what she knows. This plot choice, in itself, allows Shakespeare to criticise patriarchal culture and the **institution** of marriage, as he demonstrates that **silencing** women facilitates violence and villainy. When Emilia accuses Iago of telling "a lie, a wicked lie," Iago tries to silence her, "**Go to, charm your tongue,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). He relies on her silence and attempts to use his husbandly authority to govern her. Emilia **defies** him, saying, "**I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak: / My mistress here lies murdered in her bed,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). The contrast between Emilia **contradicting** Iago's command ("I will not charm my tongue") and the sense of responsibility conveyed by "**bound**" and "**mistress**" shows Emilia choosing her **duty** to her fellow wife over her duty to her husband. The **juxtaposition** may suggest the two are mutually exclusive. Moreover, Shakespeare demonstrates that Emilia's **free** speech is dedicated to truth and justice, and Iago is trying to thwart this; the **oppression** of women's voices is thus presented as a **campaign** against honesty, virtue, and liberation. As Emilia continues to unravel Iago's conspiracy and **ignore** his demands for silence, he "**threatens**" her with his "**sword**" and calls her a "**Villainous whore!**" (Act 5 Scene 2), drawing a comparison between silence and **violence**. Emilia is endangered and villainised for speaking freely. Iago is successful in killing Emilia, enraged by her **disobedience**, and her dying words are, "**So speaking as I think, I die, I die,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). These final remarks prove, once and for all, that women are punished for speaking up against injustice. Speech and death are **linked**, implying that a loss of your voice is a **metaphorical** death within the public sphere.

Another responsibility explored by Shakespeare is that of a wife to **uphold** her reputation and that of her husband. As women were the legal **possessions** and responsibilities of their husbands and/or fathers, they could bring dishonour to their family name through gossip or a ruined **reputation**. Men provided financial and social **stability** for women, so if a man believed his wife or daughter had failed to perform her duty to him, he could **disown** her. This system of association and status is **alluded** to when Iago explains, "**Good name in man and woman [...] / Is the immediate jewel of their souls. / [...] He that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And [...] makes me poor indeed,**" (Act 3 Scene 3), and when Othello asks, "**She is protectress of her honour too. / May she give that?**" (Act 4 Scene 1). These quotes reveal the cosmetic, **gossip-fuelled** culture that defines the play. Both men view a woman's reputation as a physical, valuable thing she is charged with to **protect**. As a woman's reputation was largely based in her (perceived) **sexuality** and her body, Shakespeare shows that by **commodifying** a woman's reputation, her body itself also became a commodity.

We **witness** Emilia's internal conflict with this duty through the course of the play. At the beginning, she appears fearful of rumour's **repercussions**, telling Iago, "**You shall not write my praise,**" (Act 2 Scene 1). This suggests she is conscious of the power Iago holds: he can choose, at any moment, to ruin her reputation and so end her life in this **social circle**. To appease him, she gives into his demands to steal Desdemona's handkerchief, admitting, "**What he will do with it, heaven knows, not I: / I nothing but to please his fantasy,**" (Act 3 Scene 3). Here, Shakespeare shows how a wife had to **blindly** obey her husband because she was



indebted to him for her social standing and financial security. Similarly, the playwright examines Emilia's **dedication** to her husband's reputation. She asks Desdemona, **"Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?" (Act 4 Scene 3)**: this implies she is willing to do whatever it takes to **improve** her husband's standing in society. Alternatively, this demonstrates how women could only rise through society's **ranks** by being associated with the right men. Iago's reputation is as important to Emilia as her own. Despite this **willingness** to exploit reputation, she remains wary of its influence: **"Nor I neither by this heavenly light; / I might do't as well i'th'dark," (Act 4 Scene 3)**. This dark **imagery** connotes secrecy and hypocrisy, suggesting Emilia can't act openly.

Desdemona's death is a **catalyst** for Emilia's self-emancipation from wifely duties. She says, **"'Tis proper I obey him, but not now. / Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home," (Act 5 Scene 2)**. She rejects the **responsibilities** and demands put upon her; the statement **"I will ne'er go home"** symbolises her liberation from Iago's **control**. Later, she says, **"Let heaven, and men, and devils, let them all, / All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak," (Act 5 Scene 2)**: this is a **marked difference** from her previous behaviour. She has cast off her wariness about reputation and gossip, no longer caring what **"men"** or society think of her. Shakespeare argues that liberation from wifely **duties** is the only thing that allows Emilia to be her true, **whole self**.

SYMBOLISM

Shakespeare uses the construct of Emilia to explore the different **archetypes**, myths, and **narratives** that surround femininity and womanhood. Emilia is subjected to symbolism and surmise as much by the men in the play than by Shakespeare or his audience; to Iago, she becomes a symbol of his **discontent**, reminding him how unhappy he is with the life he currently leads, and of female duplicity. Similarly, to Othello, she represents the **alliance** of women he believes are **conspiring** against him and taking his wife away. As Emilia is defined by the people around her, Shakespeare argues femininity is **socially constructed** in the same way. **Femininity** comes from the meanings and expectations fabricated by others and enforced on you, rather than coming from your own identity and **self expression**. In this way, he examines the very use of symbolism itself: he presents different facets of womanhood through Emilia's character while actively **questioning** and challenging that same practice.

In the text, we see how Emilia's individuality is **lost** to the opinions and perspectives of others. In private, she fights against this, expressing her own **progressive** views and aspiring for a freer future. Yet, to the men of the play, she is merely a 'whore' rather than a real person; this **dehumanisation** allows Iago to distance himself from her and, ultimately, to **kill** her. She is a victim of her society and to the patriarchal culture **permeating** it. The audience watch in silence, like the **passive** bystanders on stage, as she is demeaned, slandered, and murdered. This symbolically makes us complicit in the same crimes as the men in *Othello*, as Shakespeare argues all members of a patriarchal society are **guilty** of turning a blind eye. You could even interpret Emilia as a martyr for womanhood, except instead of being killed for holding a particular religious belief, she is killed for merely **existing**, for daring to **speak** her mind.



While a lot of Shakespeare's characters are given more **depth** through his use of symbolism and **imagery**, for Emilia, symbolism also serves to deny her individuality. She is **reduced**, by the other characters, to an **oversimplified** emblem of the fallen woman. The symbolism she uses in her dialogue shows how she is a product of her culture. Symbolism allows the playwright to take the play out of the realm of **reality** and into another playing field, as it appeals to our emotions and memories more than plain dialogue can. Shakespeare's exploration of the **human condition** is strengthened by it.

Heaven vs. Hell

This **Biblical imagery** is used to convey one of the most prominent **binaries** in the play: the contest between good and bad. Reflecting the fervent religion of the times, Heaven and Hell are used by Shakespeare's characters to judge **morality**. They act as points of reference, helping them to decide if a person or action is virtuous or not. They are also used to communicate their disgust or **admiration**. However, Heaven and Hell are the epitomes of good and bad; as such, when characters reference them, Shakespeare reveals the strict, binary perspective of society. People want to be able to sort things into **neat boxes**. Which box someone belongs in, however, is shown to be subjective. Emilia is viewed as a **fallen woman**, so is associated with sin and Hell, but she engages with the imagery of Heaven and Hell. This **integrates** her into the culture that others **exclude** her from.

Most notably, Emilia's Biblical references are used in **opposition** to Othello's: where Othello calls Desdemona a "**devil**" and compares his anger towards her to "**Fire and brimstone!**" (**Act 4 Scene 1**), Emilia "**wager[s]**" Desdemona is "**honest, chaste, and true,**" (**Act 4 Scene 2**). Desdemona's character is simultaneously an **angel** to Emilia and a demon to Othello, expressing the **subjective** and capricious nature of this method of **judgement**. Emilia tells Othello, "**If any wretch have put this in your head, / Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse!**" (**Act 4 Scene 2**), referencing the "**curse**" God put upon the snake in the Garden of Eden for **misleading** Eve. This allusion portrays the **slander** against Desdemona's good name as an introduction of sin into a fundamentally pure thing, just as the serpent introduced **sin** into the world through the fall of Eve. Moreover, Shakespeare uses the reference to subvert the conventional narrative of **adultery**: Eve is traditionally perceived as the first 'fallen woman', and Othello is blaming Desdemona for her **betrayal** like how Eve is blamed for her actions in the **Garden**. In contrast, Emilia condemns the man responsible for construing this tale of deception, suggesting he should be "**curse[d]**", not Desdemona. The **dichotomy** between "**heaven**" and the satanic connotations of "**serpent**" may represent the coexistence of vice and **virtue** in humanity, where they can be found side by side and are hard to **distinguish** between.

Fundamentally, the **contrasting** perspectives of Emilia and Othello show how the same story can be interpreted in starkly different ways: what is Heavenly to Emilia is **Hellish** to Othello. The truth is **debatable** because we all live through different experiences. Emilia is a working-class woman and Othello is a military man; they inhabit different areas of society, and so their



experiences are different, contributing to their **contrasting** perspectives. Equally, they are fed different lies by Iago - perhaps a symbol for how our different experiences **shape** our view of the world.

The **antithesis** constructed in Othello and Emilia's characters reaches its **crux** in the final scene of the play. The **tragedy** of Desdemona's death is revealed to Emilia and Othello boasts, "**She's like a liar gone to burning hell: / 'Twas I that killed her,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). His coarse honesty conveys his feeling of victory over the powers of evil. Emilia replies, "**O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!**" (Act 5 Scene 2). The **authority** and strength in the noun "**angel**", connoting complete **goodness** and piety, counteracts the accusations of "**whore**" (Act 5 Scene 2) that taint Desdemona's reputation; this **reflects** how Emilia, as a character, resists and **rectifies** the malignity and antipathy that marks the men's approach to women, in particular to Desdemona. The **comparative** adjective "**blacker**" addresses the association between being black and being evil - a conception that was ingrained into society; it suggests Othello's **nature** now fulfils the stereotypes of blackness. His identity is associated with Hell just as Desdemona's alleged identity as a "**whore**" (Act 5 Scene 2) was. Shakespeare demonstrates that the concepts of Heaven and Hell are **weaponised** as political motifs, and everyone is **conditioned** by this propaganda.

Emilia goes on to **accuse** Othello, "**Thou dost belie her [...] / Thou art rash as fire to say / That she was false. O, she was heavenly true!**" (Act 5 Scene 2), implying Desdemona's identity is being **distorted** by his use of Biblical imagery. Her faith in Desdemona's innocence and her outrage at Othello's **slander** suggests only women believe the word of other women; Shakespeare shows how easily women are **villainised** and stigmatised.

The Handkerchief

Typically in Shakespearean plays, love **tokens** are used to symbolise **confinement** and ownership within a relationship. Great importance is put into the handkerchief, the main love token in *Othello*, as **proof** of Desdemona's fidelity and love. Ascribing so much significance to a material possession may symbolise the objectification and **commodification** of women in Jacobean society and - perhaps more importantly - within the institution of marriage. As much as the handkerchief is **meaningful** to Othello and Desdemona's marriage, it equally has **repercussions** for the relationships between Emilia and Iago, and Emilia and Desdemona.

The handkerchief is a metaphor through which Shakespeare explores Emilia's ties to Iago as his wife and as his unknowing **accomplice**. When Desdemona "**drops**" the handkerchief, Emilia picks it up and says, "**I am glad I have found this napkin: / [...] My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it,**" (Act 3 Scene 3). Emilia is acting on Iago's command, not of her own **will**; this is further supported by the adjective "**glad**" and hyperbole "**a hundred times**" reflects a husband's **dominance** over and **intimidation** of his wife. Shakespeare insinuates that wives are exploited by their husbands to do their dirty work for them. "**Wayward**" and "**wooded**" imply **mischievous** and malice, suggesting Emilia may be aware of her husband's



wickedness; alternatively, the connotations of “**wooded**” might mean Iago used sex to establish his authority and **dominate** her.

She adds, “**What he will do with it, heaven knows, not I: / I nothing but to please his fantasy,**” (Act 3 Scene 3); she admits her **suspicious** regarding Iago’s intentions, but doesn’t act on them. The phrase “**I nothing but**” depicts women as blindly loyal subjects, unable to think for themselves. Shakespeare implies Emilia is willfully **ignorant**, perhaps to protect her own **conscience**. “**I nothing but to please his fantasy**” might present a happily dotting wife, or someone who feels she is **obliged** to obey her husband to ensure her own **security**. Therefore, the handkerchief represents Emilia’s duty as Iago’s wife, marking out the extent of Iago’s influence over her and how **unreasonable** his demands are. The moment when Emilia steals the handkerchief is the only time when she has a soliloquy or time alone on stage, emphasising the **significance** of her relation to Iago and suggesting that, even in **private**, her thoughts are dedicated to her husband.

The handkerchief symbolises Emilia’s betrayal of Desdemona and so explores the conflicting **allegiances** in her character. She is torn between her friend and her husband. Arguably, she *wants* to help Desdemona but she *needs* to help Iago, because of the **expectations** bestowed on wives. While taking the handkerchief, she explains its origins in a piece of exposition: “**This was her first remembrance from the Moor. / [...] She so loves the token,**” (Act 3 Scene 3). From the audience’s perspective, knowing the **provenance** of the handkerchief makes Emilia’s betrayal even more **egregious**. The handkerchief’s sentimental value adds to its meaning as a symbol for Desdemona’s love. By asking his wife to **steal** it, Iago is metaphorically using his wife to acquire the love of another woman. Alternatively, Emilia’s **acknowledgement** of the handkerchief’s importance to her friend implies she is feeling conflicted. She tells Iago, “**If it be not for some purpose of import, / Give’t me again. Poor lady, she’ll run mad / When she shall lack it,**” (Act 3 Scene 3), implying her conscience is **troubling** her and she already regrets her actions.

When Desdemona asks Emilia, “**Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?**”, she feigns ignorance: “**I know not, madam,**” (Act 3 Scene 4). Hence, the theft introduces lies and deceptions into a friendship that is otherwise loyal and **transparent**. The handkerchief becomes a symbol for the barriers between the two women and their conflicting loyalties. In the end, Emilia’s action contributes to Desdemona’s murder, making her **complicit** in her friend’s death. Shakespeare shows how women **strengthen** and perpetuate patriarchal **oppression**, either knowingly or unknowingly. Iago compromises Emilia and Desdemona’s friendship by telling her to steal the handkerchief, perhaps reflecting a woman’s isolation from family and friends upon **marrying**. In a broader sense, Shakespeare argues that the only **obstacle** to female solidarity is patriarchal interference.

The handkerchief is an emblem for female **chastity** in the same way that a woman’s own body is a testament to her purity. With this comparison in mind, the handkerchief’s **possession** at different times by Emilia, Iago, Cassio and Bianca becomes a metaphor for the way a woman’s



reputation is **shaped** by those around her. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as a **symbolic** 'adultery', for Desdemona's good name and innocence are touched and so **defiled** by each individual. Emilia knows how much Desdemona "**loves**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**) the handkerchief but takes it anyway, giving the sense of **voyeurism**. The handkerchief is removed from its intimate context and made **public**, so that everyone intrudes on something private. This links to the manner in which everyone tries to interfere with Othello and Desdemona's marriage, and the love **lives** of women in general.

As discussed before, a woman is **defined** by her reputation. The significance of rumour to a woman's perceived **purity** is supported when Emilia says, "**I'll have the work tane out,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**) and Cassio requests of Bianca, "**I would have it copied,**" (**Act 3 Scene 4**). The handkerchief's pattern is **duplicated** in the way a rumour spreads, and each time it is "**copied**" it loses its individuality. Desdemona no longer has control over her own reputation. Moreover, the handkerchief **links** the three women of the play together: they are all of different classes, but they share common experiences. Shakespeare demonstrates that all women are subjected to **objectification** and the commodification of their bodies.

Prostitution

Within Shakespeare's Venetian society, the **accusation** of strumpet or whore is used to identify women who have fallen out of favour, who are **disgraced** and shamed and should be avoided. The insult depicts a woman who has an '**unnatural**' sexuality and has strayed from her 'proper' place and **purpose**. While it is used to demean women, the use of prostitution as the ultimate insult to a woman's character exposes the threat it poses to **patriarchal** society. The **commodification** of women's bodies is used to **control** them, but a prostitute embraces this commodification and seizes it for her own benefit. Moreover, by selling their bodies, women can make a place for themselves on the **economic** ladder - a position typically **forbidden** to women at the time. In the Jacobean era, 'fornicating women' **jeopardised** the ideology of the Church and the **fabric** of society; they were blamed for leading men astray, **destroying** male honour, and shaming their families. All of this suggests that female sexuality was reviled because it was **powerful**. The same is true within the text: Othello and Iago **resent** their wives for their sexuality even while degrading and belittling them.

Iago and Emilia's interactions on stage are **founded** in this culture of **slut-shaming** and sexual hypocrisy. Iago tells Emilia that women are "**players in [their] housewifery, and housewives in [their] beds**", adding, "**You rise to play and go to bed to work,**" (**Act 2 Scene 1**). This undermines women by portraying them as **duplicious** actresses - "**players**" on a stage. The phrase "**go to bed to work**" is a direct euphemism for prostitution even as he insinuates that women "**work**" by serving men sexually. Shakespeare highlights the **hypocrisy** surrounding prostitution: men want to use prostitutes for their own **pleasure** while condemning those same

A05: The Handkerchief & Othello's Couples

"As the handkerchief, the '**ocular proof**' (3.3.360) of **infidelity**, passes from Othello to Desdemona to Emilia to Iago to Cassio to the courtesan Bianca, it **links the three couples together** to highlight what they have in common. It draws an **implicit parallel between the despised kept woman Bianca and the respectable wives Desdemona and Emilia**, revealing the true nature of the married woman's role by erasing the distinction between them." - Kiernan Ryan



prostitutes on moral grounds. In the same way, Iago tries to belittle women for being prostitutes, or even for having a **sexuality** at all, by implying they are just sex slaves. The first of these innuendoes is delivered in prose, not meter, adding to Iago's **crudeness** and perhaps even his **condescending** tone, as prose is simpler than meter. Throughout this interaction, prostitutes are used as symbols for the supposed **untrustworthiness** and weak wills of women.

Once Emilia has stolen the handkerchief, she tells Iago, **"I have a thing for you,"** to which he replies, **"You have a thing for me? It is a common thing -"** (Act 3 Scene 3). He makes a sexual **innuendo** and alludes to her alleged **promiscuity**; you could argue he twists Emilia's words to mock her, or that she sets herself up for this comment in a type of **flirtation**. Once again, the accusation of **lewdness** is used to portray Emilia as an inferior, pathetic being who deserves to be ridiculed. He calls her **"foolish"**, which is when she plays her hand: **"O, is that all? What will you give me now / For that same thing?"** (Act 3 Scene 3). Iago has approached this conversation as if he is in charge, but now it **transpires** that Emilia has the upperhand. This change of **dynamics** imitates the simultaneous ostracisation and social power of prostitutes, as men - particularly upper class men - are dependent on them even while they **dismiss** them. Shakespeare explores this interesting dynamic through their marriage. When Emilia exposes Iago's plots and refuses to **"hold [her] peace"**, Iago's response is to call her a **"villainous whore!"** (Act 5 Scene 2). Iago is at Emilia's **mercy** at this moment - he needs her silence to survive - and this is, perhaps, reflected in his choice of **"whore"**. Shakespeare uses prostitution to symbolise the **resented** power women hold in society.

In a similar way, Shakespeare demonstrates how **prostitution** is used to **undermine** relationships between women, and female solidarity as a whole. This is shown through Othello's reaction to Emilia's faith in Desdemona. He **questions** her, hoping to uncover Desdemona's affair with Cassio, only Emilia vouches for her fidelity. He dismisses Emilia and says, **"She says enough; yet she's a simple bawd / That cannot say as much. This is a subtle whore, / A closet lock and key of villainous secrets,"** (Act 4 Scene 2). This brothel **conceit** demeans Emilia and Desdemona's friendship by portraying them as a brothel-keeper (**"bawd"**) and her sex worker (**"whore"**). Faced with the loyalty held between the two women, Othello dismisses their bond and **denies** them the value their relationship possesses. Once again, associations with 'whoring' are used to portray women as **cunning** and **deceitful**. Shakespeare uses Othello's perspective of his wife's friendship with Emilia to show how he thinks all women are **conspiring** against him. Everything a woman does is **calculated** and motivated by sex, and women work together to this common goal. Shakespeare presents us with a culture where women are viewed as debased, immoral, **depraved** beings.

CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

The central conflict in the play of 'Othello' combines two defining issues of the Jacobean era: the **treatment of women** and the treatment of outsiders. In this case, 'outsiders' refers to people of **colour**, though the same themes can be applied to another big controversy of the time - the conflict between **Catholics** and **Protestants**. Simultaneously, Shakespeare brings the



spotlight to a new system of **hierarchy** and **class**, embodied by the city of Venice. This foreshadows the direction England's economy was starting to take at the time of writing.

As such, 'Othello' is more of a **social commentary** than a morality play. This genre places Shakespeare with his contemporaries, as the Jacobean era saw a prominent use of **satire** and **politics** in its literature. That said, the play is not lacking in morals and messages for Shakespeare's audience; though 'Othello' is set some decades before, its themes and depictions convey Shakespeare's perspective on the time he was writing in, the early 1600s. Shakespeare uses the setting of **wartime Cyprus** as a lens through which to view his own 'modern' time (meaning we can do the same thing!).

Moors

The term '**Moor**' has historically been used by **Christian Europeans** to refer to people from Somalia, Ethiopia, the Middle East, the Berber coast, North Africa in general, and even India - in short, its use to specify a person's **ethnicity** is **ambiguous**. It was often used as a derogatory term so **accuracy** wasn't important to its user.

Originally, the Moors were a group of **Muslims** from what is now North Africa who captured the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) in 711 A.D. The peninsula became a **cultural** and **economic capital**, but Moorish rule was opposed by European Christians. Eventually, in 1492, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II and Isabella I triumphed in a war against the Moors of the Iberian Peninsula. This led to the Moors being **expelled** from Spain, though small communities still resided throughout Western Europe - including in Italy, where the play is set.

We see this **casual racism** and hostility towards Moors and other people of colour **manifested** in Emilia's character. As well as calling him "**Moor**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**), she calls him "**the blacker devil**", "**rash as fire**," and "**[Desdemona's] most filthy bargain**" (**Act 5 Scene 2**). This links Othello's race to his **crime** and sin, implying his character is determined by his colour. The simile "**rash as fire**" portrays black men as **capricious** and dangerously **unpredictable**, while calling him Desdemona's "**most filthy bargain**" implies being involved with him has tainted her name and innocence, which is **reminiscent** of other characters' accusations. In particular, calling him "**the blacker devil**" alludes to the common stereotype that black men were involved with **Satan**. Prior to this, Emilia doesn't interact with the theme of race, and, at this point, her focus is on her grief; the racial undertones are subconscious, showing how racism is endemic and **insidious** in Venetian culture.



Venice

The Venice of the Jacobean era was close to a **cultural utopia** in many ways. It was a symbol of beauty, culture, and civilisation. With its numerous trade links with the Eastern World and North Africa and its **thriving economy**, it was the poster child of early Modern Capitalism. At this time, England was only just beginning to trade abroad. Furthermore, Venice was a **Republic**: the wealthier **merchant** classes controlled the state and bought powerful military forces to protect **colonial exploits**.

AO5: Venice vs. Cyprus

In his edition of Shakespeare's plays, Samuel Johnson wrote, "**Had the scene opened in Cyprus, and the preceding incidents been occasionally related, there had been little wanting to a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity**". His argument is that Shakespeare's choice to set the opening act in Venice adds significant meaning to the play.

In 'Shakespeare's tragedies of love', Catherine Bates argues, "**Cyprus distorts to the point of grotesqueness the norms of civil breeding such that it is Desdemona's very accomplishments and cultivated habits which finally indict her.**" Of the contrast between the two settings, she concludes, "**[It] drives home the dialectical nature of cultural self-definition. Notions of wildness, madness, otherness and heresy are not moral absolutes but concepts that serve to confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses: civilisation, rationality, identity, and orthodoxy.**"

A consequence of this was the emergence of a **new ruling class** that hadn't been seen before. The city had laws that dictated people dress according to their social standing, but these were rarely enforced and the emerging mercantile class dressed according to financial, not social, status. In addition, Venice was viewed as a '**pleasure capital**', known for a higher **sexual tolerance** than other places.

Its status as a symbol for progress makes Venice the perfect opening for this play. Shakespeare explores what it means to be **civilised** rather than **primitive**, ultimately exposing societies such as Venice for being hypocritical and **insidious**.

Through Emilia, Shakespeare gives a **cynical** expose of Venetian culture, particularly its **patriarchal** ideologies. She tells Desdemona, "**'Tis not a year or two shows us a man. / They are all but stomachs, and we all but food,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), presenting the systemic oppression and **exploitation** of women. Furthermore, she says, "**They are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous. 'Tis a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), presenting sexual jealousy as a destructive, **inevitable** symptom of patriarchal culture. The line introduces the concept of "**monster[s]**" to civility and respectability, an image that **underlines** the contradiction and hypocrisy of Venice.

In addition, Shakespeare examines the idea of Venetian **sexual liberation** through Emilia's character. Throughout **Act 4 Scene 3**, Emilia's **progressive** views on adultery and sexuality are contrasted with Desdemona's more traditional, faithful perspective. Shakespeare uses the **juxtaposition** between the two women to challenge the **stereotype**, as Desdemona is Venetian and less sexually tolerant than Emilia. Alternatively, he takes advantage of the stereotype by associating this progressive perspective with a **foreign** country (other than Jacobean England),



which perhaps would make his contemporary audience more open to the idea. The link established between **economy** and **sexuality** in the quote, “**It is a great price / For a small vice [...] Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?**,” (Act 4 Scene 3) presents a modern, **radical**, enterprising society such as how Venice was regarded in Britain. Alternatively, you could interpret Emilia’s character as a **parody** of the stereotypes surrounding Venetian culture.

Cyprus

Crusades against Islam brought Europeans to Cyprus, and the island became a Christian military base for operations in the **Levant** (the countries of West Asia that border the Mediterranean, such as modern-day Israel and Lebanon). The **conflict** between the Christian Republic of Venice and the Islamic **Ottoman Empire** had been an on-off affair since the mid-fifteenth century; by the time the play premiered, four wars between the two nations had already taken place. The most recent of these was known as the **War of Cyprus**, which took place between 1570 and 1573. This round of violence was precipitated by a **Turkish invasion** of the isle between 1570 and 1571 that consolidated Ottoman control.

Choosing to set his play during a **crisis of living** memory amplifies the tensions within the play, as well as the play’s significance as a piece of **political commentary**. This choice is also a noteworthy **divergence** from Shakespeare’s source material, Giraldi Cinthio’s ‘Hecatommithi’, which lacked any clear **historical anchor**.

Its position within the Ottoman empire made Cyprus singularly **vulnerable** to Turkish threat, and the island was dangerously **isolated** from the rest of the Christian world. The country’s identity was **torn** between the two warring religions; this duality is reflected in Emilia’s own character, as she **struggles** to express herself while upholding her husband’s **expectations**. You could argue the conflict for Cyprus **parallels** the battle between Iago and Desdemona for Emilia’s loyalty and confidence. Like Cyprus, Emilia is vulnerable to Iago’s manipulations and **conquest** - both as a woman and as a Venetian. Her only friend on the island is Desdemona. Iago wants us to believe that everyone **suspects** Emilia of sleeping with Othello; while we don’t know the extent of this rumour, it’s clear Emilia is aware of it: “**Some such squire he was / That turned your wit the seamy side without / And made you to suspect me with the Moor,**” (Act 4 Scene 2). This accusation of adultery serves to isolate and ostracise Emilia further; she believes some “**squire**” has concocted the rumour to **sabotage** her, showing how men could distance women from their **support systems** if they so wished.

On the other hand, you could argue that Emilia’s **rebel persona** is befitting of Cyprus. Her views on marriage and **womanhood** go against even Venetian standards, and so a place that is so foreign and unfamiliar reflects how she doesn’t belong in ‘**normal**’ **society**. While her husband’s violence and **destruction** are reflected in Cyprus’ character, we can find Emilia’s revolutionary desires and stubborn **perseverance** in the island’s spirit.



The play is likely set during the **Battle of Lepanto**, a year after the Turks **conquered** Cyprus. The battle marked a decisive triumph for the Christian **Venice** and its allies 'the Holy League'. This **tense atmosphere** pervades the play, amplifying the **claustrophobia** and confusion, especially the women. Emilia is not as oblivious as Desdemona on matters of state and of sexual jealousy: "**Pray heaven it be state matters, as you think, / And no conception nor jealous toy / Concerning you,**" (Act 3 Scene 4). She even manages to guess Iago's plot, though she doesn't know how close to the **truth** she is when she says, "**I will be hanged if some eternal villain, / [...] To get some office, / Have not devised this slander,**" (Act 4 Scene 2). She is wise and **astute**, and these qualities are delivered in stark **contrast** to the growing **delusions** and irrational urgency of her peers. The unfamiliar setting of Cyprus is disorienting for many, but Emilia appears to **adjust** easily, providing a sense of respite and escape from the **chaos** around her.

All the same, we see that she is - inevitably - drawn into the conflict. When she **steals** the handkerchief, she tells the audience, "**This was her first remembrance from the Moor. / My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it,**" (Act 3 Scene 3). Shakespeare puts her contradictory **alliances** in opposition with each other, showing how Emilia is torn between Desdemona and Iago. They are both her sources of **stability** and security on Cyprus, and she can't risk **betraying** either one. Shakespeare thus uses the warring state to examine the immense **pressure** placed on women and the risks they face because of their **isolation** in wider society.

Venetians left Cyprus in 1573, and the island fell to the Turks once more. Shakespeare's audience would have known this, making the apparent **peace** celebrated in **Act 2** feel uncertain and **falsely comforting**. The characters are lulled into a **false sense of security** as Iago prepares to strike. The Venetian government has only temporarily avoided the threat, and Othello has only temporarily avoided the **wrath** of his close friend.

The significance of Cyprus as a **setting** doesn't end here. Its **reputation** for savagery and **barbarity**, alongside its identity as a military bastion, makes it the **antithesis** of Venetian calm and order. Having Venetians in Cyprus brings the conflict between the civil and the **primitive** to the fore, just as we **witness** Emilia's character defy simple **categorisation** in either camp.

AO5: Iago as Villain & Soldier

"To maintain, as some writers do, that [Iago] delights in evil for its own sake or that he is a symbol of evil rather than a human being is to ignore his plainly stated motivation and to overlook the stages by which intrigue reaches its tragic culmination. His ends are, indeed, relatively no more diabolical on a private scale than are many of the actions of armies on a public scale [...]. He is a villain, of course, but not merely because he is guilty of evil deeds; more fundamentally he is a villain because he transfers from one sphere of action the deeds proper therein to another sphere in which they are decidedly improper. It is the ethical blindness of Iago which prevents him from seeing that the methods of war, legitimate as they may be on the field of battle, are not equally applicable to the affairs of peace." - John C. McCloskey, *The Motivation of Iago*



Cyprus was **denied** its own autonomy and sovereign identity because it was continually occupied by one empire or other. This makes it a symbol for **submission**, mirroring Emilia's loss of **autonomy** and identity in the play. According to myth, Cyprus is the birthplace of **Aphrodite**, goddess of love; in contrast, we are presented with an island **engulfed** by war and violence. The island has become a **figurehead** for male power and conflict: the symbol of love is dominated by warfare. This dichotomy is mirrored in the plot, as Emilia's love for her husband and her friend is turned against her and **corrupted**.

The **relocation** to Cyprus marks the point where everything turns on its head. Iago's plans start to take hold, and nothing is as it seems. The island's **chaotic identity** and renowned 'primitive' behaviour take hold. What's more, the characters never return to Venice. The transition to Cyprus and everything it represents is **irreversible** and final. For Emilia and Desdemona, Cyprus is where they die; if Cyprus is indeed a symbol of male violence, the location of their deaths has **implications** about the role of women.

Religion

Religion was a huge part of Jacobean life, and as such plays an important role in all of Shakespeare's plays. The Church was influential in the subject of **morality** as well as the subject of **politics**: the Church had the ear of the **monarch**, who was the symbolic head of the Church and the government, meaning there was none of the **separation** between Church and State that we have today. Because of this, **Christian ideology** was the foundation of many aspects of life, and people used it as a touchstone or guide in more ways than one. It's important to remember the **ubiquity** of the Church in everyday life, because Shakespeare explores its significance as a political force in addition to its **moral consequence**.

Islam vs. Christianity

The subject of **religious conflict** takes a main role in 'Othello'. As mentioned above, the rise of the Ottoman empire exacerbated **tensions** between the Muslim and Christian worlds. This motivated a lot of foreign policy at the time, as a lot of resources and manpower were devoted to this religious war. **Venice and Cyprus** were at the epicentre of this battle. It was the position of the Church that Islam **threatened** Christianity and its values, and this was the motivation behind the Crusades. At the same time, the Ottoman Turks had launched **campaigns** against the Christian world, capturing many non-European countries including Constantinople, causing the fall of Greece and the Balkans. In the period when the play is set, these **tensions** were a fact of life, but this didn't lessen any of the stakes or bad feelings between the two sides.

The context of this conflict adds another layer to the **hostility** intended behind the name "**Moor**". When characters such as Emilia refer to Othello in this way, they are singling him out as an

AO5: A Postcolonial Reading

"Shakespeare draws upon the Christian-Turkish binary but also undercuts it by making the play's most villainous character a Venetian and its hero an outsider." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*



insider not just because of his race, but because of his (supposed/previous) **religion**. Equally, a common **belief** in many religions, including Christianity and Islam, is that **non-believers** and practitioners of religions other than your own are **heretics**, offensive to their own God. This sense of **antipathy** would have been stronger in the Jacobean era, when society wasn't so multicultural and nonsectarian as it is now; the acceptance that people have the right to worship their own religion is known as **religious pluralism**. With this in mind, when Emilia calls Othello a “**devil**” (**Act 5 Scene 2**), this may be referring to his non-Christian background.

Religion: Protestantism vs. Catholicism

Under the rule of **King James I**, England was a Protestant state, but this hadn't always been the case. Since Henry VIII's separation from the Catholic Church the century before (part of the movement known as the Reformation), England had oscillated between the **two denominations** depending on who was on the throne. Both **Catholics** and **Protestants** had suffered violence and **oppression** at the hands of the other. Because of this, the conflict and **controversy** religion brought with it was very close to home for Shakespeare's contemporary audience. This likely made the **religious conflict** in the play - between the Islamic Turks and the Christian Venetians - easier to empathise with, and so amplified the messages behind it.

Protestantism of the time encouraged a preoccupation with the self. **Introspection** was important when practising and maintaining your **faith**, as there was a movement towards **self-improvement**. Similarly, the idea of repentance and confession are fundamental principles in the Christian faith. This is reflected in the play's focus on **sin** and **guilt**, particularly the alleged sin of the wives Emilia and Desdemona. Monogamy and fidelity are practised by Christians and are regarded very highly within the Christian faith, but in Emilia Shakespeare presents us with a woman who is willing to commit **adultery** for - in her opinion - a greater good. She prefaces this confession with the caveat, “**Nor I neither by this heavenly light; I might do't as well i'th'dark,**” (**Act 4 Scene 3**). This may be **innuendo**, introducing levity to a topic that was very **controversial**. Alternatively, Shakespeare may be suggesting that Emilia is aware of the sin involved in her perspective on adultery; she chooses the cover of **darkness** to protect her from “**heavenly**” judgement. This scene between Emilia and Desdemona resembles a Catholic confession, with the two women sharing **private** and intimate details in confidence that, outside this room, would be met with **outrage**.

Religion: Jealousy

Jealousy and rational thought are integral to the play's main message, so it's helpful to know how Jacobean culture viewed them. You can see evidence of how these **cultural beliefs** shaped Shakespeare's portrayal of human nature; at the same time, you may find instances where Shakespeare **challenges** these perspectives.

In accordance with the Chain of Being, it was believed that the ability to think **rationally** was what **separated** humans from animals. A failure of reason was the cause of the **fall of man**:



allowing **passion** to overtake reason meant you had lost what made you human, reducing you to the **animalistic state** of being. This state was defined by **appetite** and **instinct**. It makes sense, then, that to act **irrationally** and impulsively made you a monster in the eyes of others, because you had fallen below the level of man and become **bestial**.

Emilia's character agrees with this **ideology**, depicting jealousy as something **dehumanising** and **feral**, yet simultaneously she accepts its inherent existence in human nature. She tells Desdemona, "**'Tis not a year or two shows us a man. / They are all but stomachs,**" (Act 3 Scene 4). This suggests that, sooner or later, a man will be **exposed** as a jealous, **irrational** being, no matter how **heroic** or infallible he may seem. Furthermore, the metaphor "**they are all but stomachs**" uses synecdoche to represent a man's **sexual desire** as an all-consuming, **overwhelming** force. Emilia believes all men are driven by lust alone.

She continues, "**They are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous. 'Tis a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), portraying jealousy as something that cannot be explained or justified. "**Begot upon itself, born on itself,**" presents an unending, **destructive** cycle. Moreover, as Desdemona has said, "**I never gave him cause,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), Shakespeare implies women are **helpless** victims to male jealousy; there is nothing they can do to avoid being the subject of a man's jealous wrath. The "**monster**" metaphor links to the theme of **brutality** and animalistic behaviour used throughout the play to depict civil society's hypocrisies and flaws. Through Emilia, Shakespeare presents the **outcome** of the play to be an **inevitable** tragedy. Alternatively, by arguing that the "**monster**" is within us all, he may be positing a new perspective on **self-improvement**: acknowledging that we all have flaws and **irrational** thoughts, rather than ignoring and neglecting them, allowing them to fester, is the first step to a better society.

Cuckoldry

Saying that 'Othello' is a play about jealousy is certainly a **simplistic** perspective. You could argue that the play is less about jealousy itself and more about **male ownership** of women's bodies, and the role this plays in the **emotion of jealousy**. Desdemona is stripped of **autonomy** and identity as she becomes a trophy for men to fight over. Othello is convinced her existence threatens **masculinity**, meaning she must die. Shakespeare ultimately argues that these **arbitrary**, man made constructions of virginity and **faithfulness** are **irreconcilable** with true love.

A05: Cuckoldry: The Ultimate Marital Crime
"From a feminist perspective, **early modern England's preoccupation with cuckoldry** demonstrates a basic male insecurity about women's sexuality." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*

In the Jacobean era, when a woman married, any **property** she owned became the property of her husband. Equally, the security of **societal order** and a husband's peace of mind were dependent on a woman's **virginity** prior to marriage and her faithfulness within it. This was because it was a woman's **duty** to bear her husband's rightful heir - the inheritor of his property,



reputation, and **identity**. Inheritance passed down the family line, so men needed to be sure a son was theirs. Illegitimate children couldn't be assimilated in **family structures**, so were viewed as threats to the **fabric** of society. Therefore, a guarantee of a woman's fidelity was paramount if the **hierarchy** of society was to be kept intact.

Cuckoldry signalled the **breakdown** of these ideologies. A cuckold is a married man whose wife was unfaithful, and holds connotations of mockery and **derision** (as noted by the characters of the play). As such, being **cuckolded** challenges beliefs that were highly protected in Jacobean society, concerning a woman's sexuality and the issue of **succession**. Becoming a cuckold was a prevalent male fear because it meant becoming an object of ridicule: you were a man who couldn't control his own wife, and had married a woman with **unnatural sexuality**.

Murder as **punishment** for adultery wasn't technically legal in Jacobean England, but common consensus accepted a cuckolded husband's right - or duty - to slay his **promiscuous** wife and her lover. Moreover, in Venice at the time the play is set, it was legal to **kill** for adultery. These popular notions of justice are challenged by Emilia's character. Firstly, by telling Desdemona **"They are not ever jealous for the cause," (Act 3 Scene 4)**, she insists this system of justice is corrupt. There is no **"cause"**, meaning the **accused** women are innocent. The charge of adultery is fully the distorted opinion of the husband. Furthermore, when she makes the bold claim, **"It is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall [...] / The ills we do, their ills instruct us so," (Act 4 Scene 3)**. Her whole monologue in this scene implicates men as the **guilty** ones in adultery. The cause and effect in **"The ills we do, their ills instruct us so"** reverses the **traditional roles** involved in cuckoldry. Through Emilia, Shakespeare is able to put the **blame**, completely and **unequivocally**, on Iago and Othello for the deaths of their wives. This defies the common consensus of his time that adulterous wives had strayed to sin and **deserved** death.

Similarly, Shakespeare uses Emilia's character to argue that the **narrative** of cuckoldry is a fabrication of male ego and **insecurity**. When she says, **"The world's a huge thing; it is a great price / For a small vice," (Act 4 Scene 3)**, showing that the **denouncement** of cuckoldry is subjective. Contrary to her contemporaries, she sees it as a **"small vice"**. Moreover, she justifies her decision to Desdemona, **"'Tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right," (Act 4 Scene 3)**, a line that hints at the corruption and **preferential** treatment in patriarchal narratives as a whole, not just within the narrative of cuckoldry. Shakespeare suggests that those in charge have the power to define what is **"right"** and wrong; consequently, men have chosen to portray cuckoldry as a **wicked sin**. The portrayal of **women's sexuality** in this way is **self-serving**, acting as a way to protect male ego.

Archetypes of Femininity

Plentiful tropes and **myths** surrounded what it meant to be a woman in Jacobean times. Generally, there were **four archetypes of femininity**, within which all women were categorised: the maiden, the wife, the widow, and the whore. These classifications, as you may have already identified, revolve around the 'stage' of a **woman's sexuality**; the maiden is a virgin, whereas



the widow has lost her **sexual identity** and is unanchored in society. Men wanted to marry **virgins** - the maiden - but used whores for their own pleasure. The fifth category of **'witch'** was reserved for those women deemed too **masculine**, ugly, or barren to be 'real' women. Additionally, there was the archetype of the **fallen** woman, someone who had lost her innocence in the eyes of others; fallen women couldn't regain their **reputations**, were the prey of gossips, and were **ostracised** from society.

Masculinity drew from these categories of **womanhood**. They served as goals or **benchmarks**. For example, virgins, newly-weds, and demure widows were **'sexual targets'**: men wanted to sleep with them because the conquest of the apparently unattainable was an irresistible **challenge** to their masculinity. Brides and betrothed women were seen as being in a state of transition between the categories, making them **vulnerable** to assault or slander. Young, **beautiful** wives were both desired and feared, because they could captivate their husbands and other men with their **'feminine wiles'**.

Emilia may be Iago's wife, but our first **introduction** to her character depicts her as the **'whore'**. In his soliloquy, Iago says, **"I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He's done my office," (Act 1 Scene 3)**. This portrays Emilia as an **unfaithful** wife, though Iago seems more concerned with Othello's **betrayal** and the rumours that are ruining his **reputation** than with his marriage. Furthermore, we are shown how wives such as Emilia are mocked and **dehumanised**. Iago says, **"I grant / She puts her tongue a little in her heart / And chides with thinking," (Act 2 Scene 1)**, portraying Emilia as the **stereotypical** nagging wife. Wives are belittled this way possibly because they have 'settled': they are committed to a man and have lost their **sexual** 'allure' or **desirability**. Rather than the familiar - his wife - Iago is attracted to what he can't have, Desdemona, perhaps merely for the sake of wanting something **unattainable**.

This **juxtaposition** between the 'sexless' wife and the **'oversexed'** whore is explored through the relationship between Emilia and Iago. As well as bemoaning her presence and making her the butt of his jokes, Iago mocks her for her promiscuity: **"I have a thing for you." "You have a thing for me? It is a common thing -" (Act 3 Scene 3)**. Emilia is **discriminated** against both for being the **mundane** wife and for being the whore, two things that are contradictory in essence. Shakespeare uses their marriage to examine the **double standards** surrounding female sexuality, such as how men simultaneously **condemn** and exploit prostitutes for their own **needs**.

Emilia's **fall** from grace foreshadows Desdemona's; while Emilia already has these **allegations** against her at the play's opening, Desdemona's **reputation** is ruined over the course of the play. By the play's end, all the women in the play are seen as **whores**: Desdemona, the **newly-fallen**; Bianca, the courtesan and laughing stock; and Emilia, who has accepted her husband's resentment. With this conclusion, Shakespeare may aim to argue that it is **impossible** for women to meet male expectations. When men are disappointed with women for



any reason, that woman is demoted to 'whore' status. Equally, any display of female sexuality whatsoever is viewed as **aberrant** or anomalous, once more giving a woman the title of 'whore'.

The **hostility** expressed towards Emilia because of her alleged **descent** into “whoring” (**Act 5 Scene 1**) typifies the narrative of the ‘fallen woman’. Shakespeare challenges this narrative, though, by **blaming** men for the fall of women. Emilia tells Desdemona, “**It is their husbands’ faults / If wives do fall,**” (**Act 4 Scene 3**). This idea is recalled in the final scene, as upon Emilia’s death Gratiano says, “**The woman falls; sure he hath killed his wife,**” (**Act 5 Scene 2**). Shakespeare has **twisted** the meaning of a fallen woman to replace the **myth** with the truth of domestic abuse and wife-killing. The ‘fallen woman’ archetype places precedence on a woman’s **chastity**, while Shakespeare’s depiction here places it on a woman’s life and **freedom**. The **metaphorical** death a woman faced for losing her respectable reputation in society parallels the literal death experienced by Desdemona and Emilia at the hands of their husbands; the ‘fallen woman’ is a myth of men’s making in numerous, **fatal** ways.

AO5: Iago’s ‘Fallen Women’

“The **ultimate irony** in the play’s representation of male-female relations **is the fact that two women accused by their husbands of “falling” morally, actually fall not morally but physically, before our eyes, felled by those morally ‘fallen’ husbands’ hands** and, symbolically, by the male-dominated society which endorses the murder of supposedly fallen women.” - Ruth Vanita, ‘Proper’ Men and ‘Fallen’ Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

The Role of Women

In the text, Shakespeare examines what it means to be a woman and to **uphold** the duties society has put upon women. The definition of ‘woman’ was much more **oppressive** and **confining** in the Jacobean era than it is now; consequently, arguments break out as conflicting views clash.

At the time of writing, a woman’s place was in the home. They had no rightful place in the public sphere. This was a **mentality** that persisted into the Victorian era and beyond. Women were considered naturally **inferior** in intellect and morality, and as a result were given no **voice** in society. Their opinions didn’t matter and their testimonies weren’t trusted. Decisions were made for them, and they were entrusted to male **‘guardians’**: their father, and then their husband.

Because of this, women were entirely dependent on the men in their lives by **necessity**. They relied on their **fathers** for education, money, food, social standing, and for finding a respectable husband to marry them off to. Once they married, the deal was **finalised** with the bride’s family giving a **dowry** to the groom as a way to pay for the bride’s ‘upkeep’, and the woman was now the legal property of her husband. Any **property** she owned up to this point now became their husband’s. This dependence put women in a **subordinate**, passive position: they had to accept,



conform, and comply, or face rejection, violence, or death. Women could be **disowned** and deprived of all support if they 'failed' to perform their daughterly or wifely **duties**. Plus, women were conditioned to **blame** themselves if they were abused. Without a dowry or male support, **prostitution** was the only option for survival.

We see the life or death importance of **obeying** your husband in Emilia's character. She steals Desdemona's **handkerchief** for Iago, even though she suspects him of wishing **ill** with it and doesn't want to betray her friend. Only when faced with her friend's **murder** is she able to break free from the **confinement** of her marriage: **"'Tis proper I obey him, but not now," (Act 5 Scene 2)**. Knowing the premium placed on female **obedience** by society at the time, we can appreciate the risk Emilia is taking. The adjective **"proper"** conveys the conflict Emilia is experiencing between **self-preservation** and justice. By **defending** Desdemona in her death, Emilia signs her own death warrant.

Argumentative and **assertive** women were perceived as threats to the order of society, so were punished and tortured. This treatment of women manifests in the ways in which Emilia is continuously dismissed, **demeaned**, or abused for using her voice. When we first meet her, Iago describes her as having **"too much"** talk (**Act 2 Scene 1**). After questioning her about Desdemona's innocence, Othello dismisses her **testimony** because **"she's a simple bawd / That cannot say as much," (Act 4 Scene 2)**. Time and again, Emilia's word isn't **valued** because she is a woman. In particular, she is **dismissed** when she jeopardises or undermines a man's opinion or **desire**; for example, Othello chooses to ignore Emilia because he wants Desdemona to be guilty. Shakespeare epitomises the **aggression** experienced by assertive women through Emilia's dying words: **"So speaking as I think, I die, I die," (Act 5 Scene 2)**. She pays the ultimate price for **speaking** up and speaking **"true"** (**Act 5 Scene 2**).

