

# Edexcel English Literature A-level

## Othello: Character Profiles

### Desdemona

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## DESDEMONA

### THE TRAGEDY OF FEMALE INNOCENCE & MARITAL VIOLENCE

#### INTRODUCTION

Desdemona is depicted as a **paragon** of **virtue**, a beautiful, loving wife, and a woman of **high rank** and culture. None of this is enough to protect her from Othello's **wrath**: once he is convinced, on Iago's word alone, that she is an **adulterer**, there is nothing that will change his mind. The question of Desdemona's innocence is **irrelevant** to him, as it becomes clear that for Othello to feel **satisfied** - and to have his **manhood** reinstated - there must be blood spilled. In the same way, Shakespeare demands of his audience: is it right that a woman be murdered for adultery, regardless of her guilt?

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 **sympathy** for Desdemona in her innocence and **confusion**, even while playing with the idea of sympathy for Othello and even Iago. The cause behind her murder is evident, and with it comes **culpability** for all onlookers - including the audience ourselves. For it may be Iago that **engineers** this **tragedy**, but he is enabled by **Venetian customs**. The myth of the cuckold and the fallen woman all strengthen his argument; equally, the tradition that what happens between a husband and his wife should remain **private** means witnesses to Othello's **aggression** do nothing to help Desdemona. The audience, like the men on stage, look on in silence, making us all **complicit** in the crime. We cannot **condemn** Iago or the passive bystanders without condemning ourselves.

Desdemona'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, Desdemona is not a **passive victim**: at many points we see her assert herself, determinedly pursuing her desires even when others disapprove. Even when it would be **natural** (if not necessary, in Venetian society) to believe Othello's **accusations** against her, she maintains her innocence, and dies a **martyr** for the female cause.

Desdemona, arguably, is the only **guiltless** character in the text. While everyone around her is succumbing to **vice** and **temptation**, she remains pure and **loyal**; faced with Othello's **brutality** and short temper, she continues loving him, although she recognises this may be to her **detriment**. To some, her only crime is her **naivety**: she is unaware of **military custom** and



operation, so doesn't understand Othello's world. Alternatively, an interpretation may be her only crime is her **courage**: she defies the expectations of her father and her community, marrying the man she loves in the face of **racism** and **bigotry**. Her love is unyielding and **forgiving** - garnering our respect but also taking her to her death.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **The Ingenue:** A prominent quality of Desdemona's characterisation is her **innocence** and **virtue**. Shakespeare highlights her **kindness**, loyalty, and **selflessness**, portraying her as the perfect '**maiden**'. At the same time, he implies that her innocence exists largely in the perceptions of others: Brabantio calls her "**a maiden never bold,**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**), Cassio calls her, "**a maid / That paragon all description,**" (**Act 2 Scene 1**), and Othello describes her as an "**excellent wretch**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**). Desdemona's **chastity** is much sought after and **capitalised** on. Though her innocence is partly a concoction of **male fantasy**, there are still aspects of her personality that make her fit the ingenue archetype. She is ignorant of the workings of **military culture**, creating friction between her and Othello; what's more, she is tragically unaware of **toxic masculinity**. She maintains that her husband is better than such a base emotion, even when faced with the **ugliness** of his fury. Her naive outlook on married life is recalibrated by the **down-to-earth wisdom** of her female counsel, Emilia.
- **The Mediator:** Desdemona is as much of a **wordsmith** as her husband. Her character is often placed in the **middle of tensions** and conflicts: for instance, between Othello and Brabantio, and Othello and Cassio. In these situations, she is **diplomatic** and **empathetic** with her language, aiming to **resolve** any difficulties. This skill is demonstrated in her first appearance on stage, as she appeals to her father, "**I do perceive here a divided duty,**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**). Similarly, she appeals for Cassio's case, telling him, "**Thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**). Shakespeare portrays her extreme **altruism**, sacrificing herself for the needs of others; this reaches its crux as Desdemona is killed, in part, for her perseverance in representing Cassio. She explains to Othello, "**He hath left part of his grief with me / To suffer with him,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**), illustrating that others' **burdens** become her own.

### **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.



The conflicts of the play are taken out on her, with many juxtapositions symbolically clashing within her **identity**. This may have implications for the role of women in society as **subservient** dependents.

- **The Strong Female Protagonist:** Despite Brabantio characterising her as a “**maiden never bold**” (Act 1 Scene 3), Shakespeare presents Desdemona’s **assertiveness** and **self-assuredness**. She isn’t afraid to speak her mind or ruffle feathers. In her opening address, she openly defies her father: “**I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor my lord,**” (Act 1 Scene 3). She fights for her right to accompany Othello to Cyprus, revealing her **bravery** and fierce **commitment**. Furthermore, joining her husband on a wartorn isle reflects her fearless, **resilient** spirit. Her presence on stage is bookended with another **defiant act**, as she maintains her innocence in the face of Othello’s lies and fury: “**That death’s unnatural that kills for loving [...] A guiltless death I die,**” (Act 5 Scene 2). She doesn’t hesitate to **confront** Othello with what he has done, refusing to **surrender** to his authority as her husband. Shakespeare implies she is killed as punishment for her **rebellious** resolve.
- **The Doting Wife:** In the character of Desdemona, Shakespeare shows us someone who is **unwavering** in their love. In the beginning of the play, her love lifts her spirits and **liberates** her. She says, “**The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase,**” (Act 2 Scene 1); in the face of her society’s severe **disapproval**, oblivious of Iago’s conspiring, she feels invincible and optimistic for the future. Love **empowers** her. She explains to the Senate, “**My heart’s subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord. / [...] To his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate,**” (Act 1 Scene 3), meaning their lives are linked forever. With **religious imagery** that evokes the wedding ceremony, Shakespeare shows her commitment herself entirely to her husband. This **unconditional love** endures to the end of the play, even when she knows Othello means to murder her: “**His unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love,**” (Act 4 Scene 2). She is faithful to him in mind and body, rendering her as the **ideal wife**.
- **The Martyr:** As the play reaches its **denouement** and Iago’s plan comes to full fruition, Desdemona becomes **forlorn** and dispirited. Where before her dialogue was full of lively, **colourful imagery**, she now speaks of death: “**If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of those same sheets,**” (Act 4 Scene 3). She feels imprisoned with no way out, and her death is now an **inevitability**. However, she appears to accept this fact, as shown by her **funeral request** to Emilia. This compliance might be interpreted as a surrender and a **loss of courage**, or as a strength of will. She yields to Othello’s judgement and accepts the blame for her murder, but also protests her own innocence and is willing to die for what she believes to be true. The **ironic truth** of her faithfulness turns her death into a call to arms for women; Othello discovers her innocence when it is too late, exposing the flaws in his judgement and in patriarchal society as a whole: “**this**



look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,” (Act 5 Scene 2). In death, Desdemona becomes a **saint**: “heavenly true” (Act 5 Scene 2).

## RELATIONSHIPS

**Othello** | When the play begins, Othello and Desdemona have **eloped**, unbeknownst to her father. They fell in love during Othello’s visits to her house to speak with her father, as Othello entertained Desdemona with tales of his life in foreign lands. While others **disapprove** of their union because of Othello’s race and **outsider status**, it is one of the reasons Desdemona loves him. Initially, their relationship represents the **ideal marriage**; they love each other strongly and are happy in spite of the **objections** of others. Desdemona’s love **empowers** her. Their future is full of **promise**. Furthermore, their relationship is a mutual, balanced one; they each respect the other, drawing **strength** and **comfort** from them. This challenges both the racism of the time and the **misogyny** of marriage as a patriarchal institution. Othello allows her more **freewill** and voice than was typical of the time; similarly, Desdemona stands up for herself and Othello, **disregarding** the **restraints** of class and colour that her peers observe.

However, the **unknown territory** of Cyprus and everything it brings with it adds **strain** to their relationship. One main conflict in the opening acts is their attempts to **consummate** their marriage. Repeatedly, they are **denied** time alone together, showing the general objection to their relationship still impacts them. The chaos that erupts and Cassio’s subsequent demotion adds more **tension** to their relationship, as their **contrasting** perspectives on **duty** and **warfare** are brought to light. She mixes Othello’s work with his personal life by appealing Cassio’s case to him. Either Desdemona doesn’t know about **military customs** and Othello’s responsibilities or she believes they are trivial and **unreasonable**; it may be that she sees the pain Othello’s decision has caused, and doesn’t think the politics behind it are worth such suffering. Her naive, caring heart drives a wedge between them. This is amplified by Iago’s **lies**, which adds a different context to her actions.

Ultimately, through Othello and Desdemona’s relationship Shakespeare portrays the **malignance** of **self-doubt** and **insecurity**, particularly a man’s **insecurity** in his own masculinity. Othello’s love for Desdemona is usurped by his **paranoia**; all traces of his previous trust in her are gone. His wife becomes a source of **fury** and **humiliation** for him, and he

### **AO5: Jealousy, Racism, & Sexism**

“[Othello and Desdemona’s] **defiance of the Venetian taboo** [...] locks them from the outset into a **defensive posture**, which predisposes Othello to the insecurity and doubt that grip him so swiftly at Iago’s prompting. But Othello’s vulnerability as a **black outsider**, who **unconsciously shares the white perception of his blackness**, is inseparable from his **thralldom** to a **patriarchal concept of masculinity** and a **misogynistic concept of marriage** that are just as endemic as racism in Venetian culture, and that play an equally crucial role in sealing both Desdemona’s fate and his own. Thus **sexual jealousy is shown to be the rule in Venice** rather than an exceptional emotional disorder to which Othello is especially prone to succumb. [...] All these characters **fall prey like him** to ‘the green-eyed monster’ that stalks any society in which the sexual desire of one human being is regarded as the property of another.” - Kiernan Ryan



reduces their marriage to the **traditional dynamic** of a man fighting for authority over his wife. In the end, he believes it is his duty to murder her in order to save others from the fate of a **cuckold**. He views her death as a **sacrifice** for the benefit of all men, choosing **male solidarity** over **romantic love**. In contrast, Desdemona remains **loyal** to her husband until her death. She doesn't understand the reasons behind his anger but is committed to **resolving** the issue. As was typical for wives of the time, she blames herself for Othello's unhappiness. Even when she recognises her death is imminent, she chooses to stay by his side, sacrificing herself for her love because she cannot bear to **abandon** him.

**Emilia** | Supposedly, Emilia is Desdemona's **maid** or servant, but it is clear the two are close **friends**. Again, Desdemona defies **traditional** structures of class and follows her heart. Parallels are drawn between the two women's marriages; their husbands, by the end of the play, are 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. 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.

#### **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

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.

**Brabantio** | Desdemona marries Othello without her father's knowledge, but it is clear she still cares for him and **respects** him. It is his prejudice and the **disapproval** of their culture that forces her to **elope**. In her address to the Venetian Senate, Desdemona emphasises how she is **indebted** to her father for her education and **lifestyle**. This adds a **power dynamic** to their relationship, as Desdemona feels **obligated** to honour her father. In addition, she explains to him that she must **respect** her husband over her father in the same way her own mother honoured Brabantio over her father. This exchange demonstrates the **political influences** and constraints that hold significant influence over their relationship. The love between father and daughter is **superseded** by social contracts and **negotiations**.

#### **AO5: Daughterly vs. Wifely Duty**

"In choosing a foreigner [Desdemona] has violated the Venetian norm of arranged endogamous marriages [...] and rejected her father's authority. Yet, she honours the patriarchal dictum that, once married, the wife owes her husband the same respect and duty she had shown her father. [...] At the same time, romances, poems and plays often countered patriarchal authority in favour of romantic love. Just as the Duke overrules Brabantio's demands in Act 1, Scene 3, in fictional narratives the **blocking father figure cannot prevail** and young lovers marry. If Othello ended after Act 1, it would be, as many commentators have observed, a romantic comedy." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, Critical Approaches to Othello

Just as the **misogynistic custom** of female **ownership** demeans the familial bond between these two characters, Shakespeare implies that Brabantio loves an **idealised** version of his daughter, rather than Desdemona herself. When **objecting** to her marriage, he describes her as a **meek**, obedient, quiet lady. He thinks Desdemona is acting out of character by marrying Othello, particularly because he thinks she is afraid of him. However, the woman who comes on stage is **fearless**, assertive, and **self-assured** in her love for Othello. We get the impression Brabantio doesn't know his daughter as well as he thinks he does. The ideals of a '**pure maiden**' and an 'obedient daughter' create a barrier between them. Brabantio dies of a broken heart as a result of Desdemona's **betrayal**, but he may be mourning the **authority** he has lost more than his daughter.

**Iago** | Iago's false bond with Desdemona is perhaps the most **tragic** of the play. He **pretends** to be her friend, even **comforting** her when Othello loses his temper with her. He **impersonates** a close ally even while he plots her death, **luring** her into the path of Othello's fury. Desdemona, in contrast, **respects** Iago as a close friend of her husband, and trusts his opinion. When Desdemona feels helpless and alone, she takes comfort in Iago's **loyalty**; as an audience, we know Iago is **faking** it all, making us pity her even more for how alone she truly is. Desdemona has faith in Iago to protect her against her husband's **violence**, and he betrays this trust.



When Othello loses his temper with Desdemona and hits her, Iago is who she summons for. She is **disheartened** and **shaken**. Iago tells her not to cry, that Othello is just having a bad day and will recover in time. Part of this response may be **calculated** to further his own plot. At the same time, though, his reply imitates the typical response of family members and friends to women experiencing domestic **abuse** at the time. In the face of **taboo**, women are **abandoned** to face their husbands alone.

#### **AO5: Iago & Desdemona**

“Iago’s speeches here are not especially “villainous”; they are typical of the advice routinely offered to victimised wives by family, neighbours, and friends. In fact, Iago’s **villainy is as successful as it is** because he **speaks to the lowest common denominator**, the most widely accepted prejudices.” - Ruth Vanita, ‘Proper’ Men and ‘Fallen’ Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

In addition to his perpetuation of domestic violence, Iago perpetuates the **objectification** of women. He purports to love Desdemona, yet causes her immense **suffering**. His actions reveal his true **motives**, and it seems he views Desdemona as a **trophy**, a symbol for his **virility** and authority over Othello. Othello has slept with his wife, and so it is only fair that he sleeps with Desdemona: **“wife for wife,” (Act 2 Scene 1)** he explains, in a maxim that closely resembles the Bible’s **“an eye for an eye”**. In this way, Desdemona is **dehumanised**, fought over like **merchandise**.

**Cassio** | We don’t know much about Desdemona’s relationship with Cassio before the play starts, if they even know each other at all. However, Cassio is her husband’s lieutenant, and Desdemona **respects** him greatly for this. Cassio, for his part, claims to be the perfect Florentine gentleman, greeting women with kisses and performing all the actions **typical** of **chivalry**. He cares for Desdemona as a **beautiful** woman, but when Iago pushes him to admit that he wants to sleep with her, he doesn’t rise to the bait. This is **consistent** with his identity of the perfect gentleman, though his **chivalry** still objectifies Desdemona. Respectful as he may be, he is still happy for Desdemona to speak to Othello in his stead. By charging her with this **responsibility**, he unknowingly sends her to her **death**.

It’s **unclear** if Cassio is worthy of Desdemona’s loyalty because of some prior friendship or if taking on other people’s cases is merely part of who she is. She is willing to **use** her position as Othello’s wife to **campaign** for Cassio, even though it **risks** adding **strain** to their relationship. Cassio and Desdemona’s relationship demonstrates her willingness to put others before herself; she carries his **burden** with her and, in the end, **sacrifices** herself fully for him.



## KEY THEMES

Because Desdemona 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 Desdemona's character as a **construct** goes beyond a commentary on femininity, **misogyny**, and violence against women, though these are very significant ideas. It is her **race** and her class that make Brabantio, Iago, the Senate and others believe Othello isn't a suitable husband for her. Desdemona, on the other hand, pays no mind to the complex **politics** and **customs** underlying Venetian life; she loves Othello because of his **cultural heritage** and his military role. As such, she symbolises a **utopian**, 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.

## Love & Marriage

Within the text, Shakespeare examines what **marriage** means to different people. When Shakespeare was writing, it was commonplace for fathers to choose who their daughters could marry; hence, marriage was a symbol of political **alliance** or tactics, rather than a **testament** to true love. To Iago and eventually Othello, marriage is a legal **contract** that gives the husband **authority** and ownership over his wife. Desdemona's view of marriage, however, is in accordance with the perfect romantic ideal. To her, marriage is about **love**.

In his presentation of the couple's **courtship**, Shakespeare gives Desdemona an active role; this is in contrast to tradition, where women were expected to be **passive** as suitors courted them. Othello recounts, "**She'd come again, and with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse,**" (Act 1 Scene 3), showing how Desdemona knew what she wanted and pursued it. The verb "**devour**" is **intense** and **bordering** on aggressive, conveying her active participation in their relationship. The verb also connotes **carnal** desire, as Shakespeare attests to the presence of female **sexuality** in relationships.

As Othello continues his story, Shakespeare presents love as something that should bring **comfort** and **strength** to both parties; Othello says, "**She gave me for my pains a world of sighs: / She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, [...] / 'Twas wondrous pitiful; / She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished / That heaven had made her such a man,**" (Act 1 Scene



3). Desdemona's **empathy** for him shows the **respect** she has for him. She wants to **console** him, presenting marriage as a **mutual** give and take. The line "**she wished / That heaven had made her such a man**" suggests Othello's heroism is romanticised; his **exotic tales** offer an escape from her **mundane**, restricted world. Alternatively, it suggests she wishes to be "**such a man**" herself, again showing how Othello offers **escapism** and liberation for her. His life story, his colour and his class, are so far flung from her restrained life in Venice. It could be interpreted that Desdemona is in love with the **idea** of Othello, the **romanticised** archetype of a hero, than with Othello himself. Even if this is so, Shakespeare suggests Othello doesn't mind: "**She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them,**" (Act 1 Scene 3), depicting the mutual respect and **understanding** they share. Shakespeare suggests their marriage is founded on Othello's **Otherness** and Desdemona's ambitious, large heart.

**A05: Desdemona & Othello's Defiant Act of Love**

"Othello and Desdemona **act as if a black man from Africa and an upper-class white woman from Venice have every right to fall in love**, marry and be left to live happily together. They act, in other words, as if they were already **free citizens** of a truly civilised future, instead of prisoners of a time when racial prejudice and sexual inequality are so ingrained that even their heroic hearts are tainted by them.

"As a result, **Othello and Desdemona find unleashed upon them**, in the shape of Iago, the **venomous rage** of a society whose **foundations are rocked by the mere fact of their marriage.**" - Kiernan Ryan

In Desdemona, we see love to be something fearless, unyielding, and **unapologetic**. She declares to the Senate, "**That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world,**" (Act 1 Scene 3), showing her **refusal** to back down. **Subverting** the customs of her time, she has chosen Othello to be her husband and demands that her decision is respected. The argument that women have a right to **choose** their husbands is typical of Shakespeare's plays. The imagery in "**downright violence**" and "**storm of fortunes**" connote **warfare** and are typically **masculine**, conveying the power of her love; the imagery also alludes to Othello's **heroism**, which she loves him for. Shakespeare presents marriage as perfect **harmony** between two people: Desdemona explains, "**My heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord,**" (Act 1 Scene 3), a metaphor that conveys **solace** and union, even to the point of complete **loss** of the Self. The lines between Othello and Desdemona have **blurred**, fulfilling love's goal to **transcend** all barriers.

Shakespeare uses a **semantic field** of religious **allusions** to portray Desdemona's love as something **sacred** and idealised. She says, "**To his honours and valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate,**" (Act 1 Scene 3), and "**The rites for which I love him,**" (Act 1 Scene 3), returning to the idea of marriage as a ritual for true love. The religious imagery suggests Desdemona's love resembles **faith**, as she **worships** Othello. In contrast, when she



notices Othello's change of character and **volatile** behaviour, she tells Emilia, "**We must think men are not gods,**" (Act 3 Scene 4). This implies she is recognising her **naivety** in worshipping Othello as an **infallible** being. Shakespeare may be arguing that marriage should be about understanding and accepting your partner's flaws; on the other hand, he may imply that marriage is **ignorant** in its idealism.

### Loyalty & Devotion to Men

Desdemona's **commitment** to Othello is unwavering, even when he becomes **abusive** towards her. Shakespeare shows how she takes the role of **dutiful** wife seriously. While her devotion may present an idealised version of unending love, Shakespeare also uses it to demonstrate the **entrapment** of women in marriage. In a patriarchal society such as Jacobean England, a woman's only hope to survive and live a respectable life was to have a **husband**. Because of this, we can see that Desdemona has no choice but to love Othello, to see past his **cruelty**, and to **obey** his wishes. Her love for him is **innate** and **deep-rooted**, perhaps implying she has been conditioned to the point that she physically cannot stop loving him.

Shakespeare explores the **conflicting** loyalties women were expected to honour in society. Addressing her father, Desdemona says, "**I do perceive here a divided duty: / To you I am bound for life and education; / [...] You are lord of all my duty; / [...] But here's my husband,**" (Act 1 Scene 3). The **duality** of a "**divided duty**" implies she is under immense **pressure** to please both parties; also, it challenges the idea that marriage was a transaction between father and husband, as Desdemona maintains she still feels a duty to her father. She is the one deciding who she will **serve**. Still, Shakespeare shows how she must **appease** her father and avoid **upsetting** him, as she acknowledges "**to you I am bound for life and education**". Furthermore, this illustrates how dependent women were **forced** to be on the men in their lives. It is implied the "**duty**" women felt was a necessary and inevitable consequence of their denied **autonomy**. In the Jacobean era, women could be disowned or **deprived** of financial support if they failed to perform their daughterly/wifely duties. Shakespeare portrays two "**lord[s]**" Desdemona must serve; Brabantio and Othello are in conflict with each other, but their seemingly irreconcilable differences are **reconciled** in Desdemona. She is forced to become an emblem for **compromise** and diplomacy.

A consequence of Desdemona's **devotion**, Shakespeare illustrates, is a loss of her individuality. She tells the Senate, "**My heart's subdued even to the quality of my lord,**" (Act 1 Scene 3) and "**To his honours and valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate,**" (Act 1 Scene 3). These metaphors imply Desdemona takes **instruction** from Othello on what kind of person to be. Her identity is **irreversibly** enmeshed with his. Though at this stage in the play, this **union** of "**soul[s]**" appears romantic, Shakespeare reveals the **dangers** of such dependency. Now Desdemona has "**consecrated**" herself to him, she cannot leave; she must serve him as a religious **follower** serves their god. Subsequently, she tells her husband, "**Whate'er you be, I am obedient,**" (Act 3 Scene 3), implying **blind** loyalty and lost liberty. Desdemona is subjected to Othello's capricious **mood swings** and identity change. The line



“**whate’er you be**” implies the legal contract of marriage supersedes the love she feels for his “**honours and valiant parts**” (Act 1 Scene 3): he can **lose** the qualities she admires, and she must still obey him.

As mentioned before, women were **dependent** on their husbands for **financial** and **social security**. If they lost the favour of their husbands, they would lose a life worth living. Because of this, Desdemona’s literal **death** can be interpreted as a symbol for the metaphorical deaths women faced at the whim of their husbands. Just as Othello chooses to take the **law** into his own hands and **murder** Desdemona, the worth of a woman’s life and whether she deserved a place in high society was **decided** arbitrarily by the men in her life. When Desdemona states, “**His unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love,**” (Act 4 Scene 2), we see that, in the face of the tremendous power Othello holds over her, she still cannot stop **loving** him. Her duty as his wife must **persist** even if he decides to end her “**life**”. “**Unkindness**” is a euphemism for domestic abuse, conveying how a husband’s violence towards his wife was a silent **taboo** in society. The line foreshadows her death, contrasting the trivial “**unkindness**” with the very real prospect of murder. Shakespeare shows how domestic abuse, and patriarchal rule in its entirety, is a silent killer, something that society **refuses** to see or acknowledge.

Similarly, Shakespeare demonstrates how women were expected to **sacrifice** themselves for their husbands. The juxtaposition in the quote above between Desdemona’s “**life**” and her “**love**” implies she has to sacrifice her “**life**” for “**love**”, thus **prioritising** her duty to her husband above her duty to herself. When Othello tells her to “**think on [her] sins,**” (Act 5 Scene 2), she replies, “**They are loves I bear to you**”. This means her only **sin** was loving him too much; as this line is uttered on her death bed as he **prepares** to murder her, the Biblical reference to “**sin**” amplifies the **resemblance** to a ritual sacrifice. Furthermore, as Desdemona “**bear[s]**” her sins to Othello, Shakespeare depicts a wife as someone who **surrenders** their whole being and offers it as a **gift** to their husband. Desdemona’s **devotion** is complete and **unconditional**; her reward is death.

This ideal of female **self-sacrifice** extends beyond the husband. Desdemona comforts Cassio, telling him, “**Thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away,**” (Act 3 Scene 3), showing how women had to serve all men above themselves. Desdemona sacrifices herself not just for her own love, but for Cassio’s “**cause**”. Cassio unknowingly sends her into the path of Othello’s **wrath** without protection. This line also **foreshadows** her murder; it is a **cruel irony** that her commitment to Cassio, something she is required to do, is what leads to her death. As an audience, we know that taking up Cassio’s case will **enrage** Othello and bolster Iago’s lies, but we are **powerless** to stop it. The **situational irony** creates the sense that Desdemona is trapped in a **rigged system**, one designed to see her fail. She is **punished** by her husband for following expectations, as Shakespeare highlights the **hypocrisy** and unreasonable standards of patriarchal society.

**AO5: The Husband-Wife Relationship in Public**

“Society’s **covert condemnation** of Desdemona for **choosing to marry a black man** reinforces the prejudice that what happens between husband and wife is a **private and domestic affair** in which no one should interfere.”  
- Ruth Vanita, ‘Proper’ Men and ‘Fallen’ Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello



## The Female Perspective on Cuckoldry

Shakespeare presents us with a **balanced** perspective on Desdemona's **alleged** adultery. As Iago's **narrative** takes hold and Othello's nature changes, we witness Desdemona's confusion, dismay, and hurt. This serves to **humanise** the issue, giving a face and name to something that typically anonymises the women involved; for example, Othello plots his revenge against Desdemona with Iago rather than confronting her with his suspicions. Therefore, Shakespeare encourages his audience to **sympathise** with Desdemona and take her side, although it is emotionally **difficult** to watch someone go through such an ordeal.

Desdemona's thoughts on cuckoldry are **naive** and **optimistic**, delivered in contrast to Emilia, who is cynical and **world-weary**. Emilia believes, "**They are all but stomachs, and we all but food,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), implying jealousy and greed are in a man's nature, whereas Desdemona says of Othello, "**My noble Moor / Is true of mind and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), showing she has faith that he is better than other men. As we know Othello has **succumbed** to jealousy, the situational irony implies Desdemona has bestowed Othello with qualities he doesn't possess. This suggests women are **taught** to see the best in men, even when they are undeserving. After Othello's **outburst** about the handkerchief, Emilia asks, "**Is not this man jealous?**", to which Desdemona replies, "**I ne'er saw this before. / Sure there's some wonder in this handkerchief,**" (Act 3 Scene 4). This shows Desdemona's denial as she maintains Othello's virtue in the face of his **disrespect**.

Desdemona experiences Othello's jealousy through his **anger** and cruelty, though she doesn't know the reason behind it; this serves to **isolate** and **disorient** her. She sees her husband change into a different person, and she can only blame herself; in the Jacobean period, if a husband was **unhappy**, women were taught that the blame fell on them and them alone, not on their husband. When Othello **interrogates** her, appearing agitated and harsh, she asks, "**Why do you speak so startlingly and rash?**" (Act 3 Scene 4), emphasising how she has been left in the dark. Othello fails to **communicate** with her. Moreover, the adverbs "**startlingly and rash**" convey fear and anxiety, showing how Othello has transformed from her husband to a threat. She tells Cassio, "**My lord is not my lord,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), as Shakespeare shows how jealousy has the power to destroy and mutate. In contrast, Desdemona **assures** Othello she is his "**true and loyal wife,**" (Act 4 Scene 2): even when Othello becomes someone else entirely, Desdemona remains **steadfast** and committed. Perhaps, Shakespeare is demonstrating how women weren't at liberty to follow their **emotions** or act out of turn. He shows how Desdemona blames herself for Othello's unhappiness when she says, "**I was [...] / Arraigning his unkindness with my soul; / But now I find I had suborned the witness / And he's indicted falsely,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), meaning she believes she judged him harshly. We must ask at what point Desdemona will stop **blaming** herself and recognise Othello's **irrational** behaviour. Also, it is interesting that Shakespeare uses a **conceit** of law and justice here, as later on we see Othello become the **judge** and jury in Desdemona's 'trial'.



Above all, Shakespeare argues that women are **defenseless** against the **accusation** of adultery because the truth of their innocence is irrelevant to men. Desdemona's innocence doesn't protect her from Othello's wrath. His abusive treatment of her **confounds** and tortures her because she knows she is innocent, and she can't imagine a world where someone would be **falsely accused**. Her apparent ignorance towards male **insecurity** and the myth of cuckoldry makes it even more **tragic**. She laments to Emilia, "**I never gave him cause,**" (Act 3 Scene 4). As an audience, we know it was Iago that gave him "**cause**", as well as Othello's own **paranoia**; the woman's actions, Shakespeare shows, are **removed** from the equation. Even if Desdemona were **disloyal**, one could argue she still didn't give "**cause**" for the violence and **bloodshed** that follows. Furthermore, Emilia's reply, "**They are not jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), presents women as passive bystanders or scapegoats. Men will be "**jealous for they're jealous**", no matter their wife's actions.

The consequence of **cuckoldry** for women is entrapment and **anguish**. After Othello calls her "**that cunning whore of Venice,**" (Act 4 Scene 2), Desdemona declares, "**I have none [no lord]**" (Act 4 Scene 2). In one way, this **declaration** suggests she has **liberated** herself from Othello by **rejecting** him. Alternatively, it suggests Othello has disowned her as his wife, leaving her without the security marriage offered. She asks Emilia to "**lay on [her] bed [her] wedding sheets,**" (Act 4 Scene 2), symbolising her **bond** to Othello through marriage. Even if he is no longer her lord, he is still her husband. Desdemona is greatly **shaken** and upset by Othello's accusation, saying, "**It is my wretched fortune,**" (Act 4 Scene 2). "**Fortune**" connotes destiny, something that cannot be **escaped**, thus conveying Desdemona's **imprisonment**. The phrase "**wretched fortune**" suggests all women are **confined** to the same treatment. Without her husband's favour, two paths lie ahead for Desdemona: to die **destitute** and alone like her maid, Barbary, or to become a prostitute like Bianca. She acknowledges these options when she says, "**His unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love. I cannot say 'whore': / [...] To do the act that might the addition earn / Not the world's mass of vanity could make me,**" (Act 4 Scene 2). She loves Othello too much and is too shocked by the word "**whore**" to become one, and so she has no choice but to **resign** herself to a death at her husband's hand. Shakespeare demonstrates that an accusation of **adultery** serves as a death sentence for women.

#### **AO5: Fallen Women**

"The spectacle of Desdemona and Emilia lying dead together is much more **strongly suggestive** of how **great lady 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



## 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 hungrily, 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. When Othello murders Desdemona, Emilia confronts him with her innocence, **"she was heavenly true," (Act 5 Scene 2)** and 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**”.

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 Private vs the Public Spheres

Unlike many of Shakespeare’s tragedies and histories, *Othello* is a **domestic tragedy**. This means the characters are middle-class or working-class (as opposed to kings, heads of state, or nobility), and the tragedy is a **personal** matter (in classical tragedies, the tragedy typically involves both a state matter and a personal matter). This is particularly interesting because of the military context within which the tragedy is presented to us. Othello is called off to war in **Cyprus**, giving the impression the play will centre around this **warfare**; the threat is quickly subverted, however, and the characters are left to play out domestic disputes while surrounded by an **isolated** military outpost.

This **juxtaposition** between domesticity and international affairs provides the **background** for the problems experienced by Desdemona’s character. She is a civilian in a soldier’s world, exposed to politics and **traditions** she hasn’t encountered before. This leaves her isolated and alone; some argue her **naivety** regarding Othello’s military responsibilities provokes him further, as she is unable to recognise the stress he is under. As his wife, she occupies his private sphere; by accompanying him to Cyprus, she is pulled into military affairs, for instance **lobbying** for Cassio’s reinstatement or becoming the target of Iago’s vendetta. Shakespeare depicts a character attempting to navigate the line between the public and the private, combining two worlds that aren’t designed to **coexist** so closely.

We see the **colliding** of these two worlds when Desdemona demands that she follow Othello to Cyprus, saying, “**That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world [...] / If I be left behind / A moth of peace, and**



he go to war, / The rites for which I love him are bereft me,” (Act 1 Scene 3). She is adamant that she remain with Othello wherever he goes, and her vehemence **challenges** the notion that women are **meek** and **compliant** - “a maiden never bold,” (Act 1 Scene 3). Furthermore, her demand defies the convention that a wife should never accompany her husband to war. The imagery in “**downright violence**”, “**storm of fortunes**,” and the fanfare of a “**trumpet**” alludes to the army and **warfare**, implying Desdemona fits in with Othello’s lifestyle. Shakespeare illustrates how Desdemona is challenging both the **divide** between soldier and civilian and the divide between the private and public spheres; women were expected to **occupy** the private sphere and not meddle with the public sphere, where their husbands were in charge. The metaphor “**a moth of peace**” symbolises the **oppression** of women, as they are denied **autonomy** and identity. Shakespeare implies they are used as an emblem of “**peace**” and must sit around waiting, pointlessly, until their husbands’ return. Desdemona is **granted** her wish, as Othello calls her his “**fair warrior**” (Act 2 Scene 1): this argues there is a place for women in the **public** sphere.

Shakespeare uses Desdemona’s character to demonstrate that women are **confined** to the **private** sphere, and that this confinement **enables** pain and violence. In the Jacobean era and in Venetian society, what went on between husband and wife was believed to be private, not to be **interfered** with. This mindset is made manifest in Othello’s **decision** to murder her himself: Iago suggests he

“**stranger her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated**,” (Act 4 Scene 1), confining her in death to the marital “**bed**”, the symbol of the most private of places and, in Othello’s mind, a symbol of her guilt. Othello replies, “**The justice of it pleases**,” (Act 4 Scene 1), portraying him as the **judge** and **jury** in her trial; he is able to take the law into his own hands because consensus agrees it is his business, and his alone, to deal with as he sees fit. Iago’s involvement in her murder, providing ideas for how to kill her, represents the way in which all men were **complicit** in domestic abuse. Shakespeare argues that men believed a husband was justified in his crime and even took **sadistic** pleasure from the act themselves. When Othello “**strikes**” her in public (Act 4 Scene 1), Lodovico doesn’t interfere or try to protect Desdemona. He only **objects** verbally, “**This would not be believed in Venice, / Though I should swear I saw’t**,” (Act 4 Scene 1), implying he is more **shocked** by the public **setting** than the act itself. He continues, “**I do beseech your lordship, call her back**,” (Act 4 Scene 1), asking that Desdemona be brought back into danger. Shakespeare shows that no one helped rescue Desdemona from Othello, **condemning** her to death.

#### AO5: A Woman’s Work

“Because the **handkerchief** serves as **proof of married chastity**, it cannot be copied by Emilia and Bianca. It is an **emblem of Desdemona’s body** that does not circulate because **her body is not supposed to circulate**: the regulated passage of the handkerchief is along family lines, not elsewhere. This restriction usually applied as well to the woman’s text, for **her work was private, performed for her family** and produced primarily **for their consumption**. [...]

When Desdemona loses the handkerchief, she loses the means of presenting herself as amiable, the proof that she is doing her private, domestic, bed-work. She **loses her own text**, as the Renaissance constructed it for her.” - Valerie Wayne



When Emilia asks Desdemona, **“Who hath done this deed?” (Act 5 Scene 2)**, she replies, **“Nobody; I myself,” (Act 5 Scene 2)**, embodying the **burden** of guilt and blame women were taught to bear when faced with their husbands’ discontent. In death, Desdemona is isolated and restrained to the private sphere, as she has **“nobody”** with her. Contrary to Desdemona’s deathbed confession, the audience knows she is innocent; furthermore, Shakespeare implies that all her **peers** are responsible for her death. While Othello was the one who smothered her, everyone else bore **witness** to his cruelty and abuse but stood by and **allowed** it to happen. Shakespeare argues that a society who believes marriage is a private business **perpetuates violence**; marital affairs are so private that civil law doesn’t apply, allowing husbands to execute death warrants as they please. A different **“justice” (Act 4 Scene 2)** is permitted to operate in the private sphere, and this **“justice”** is dedicated to the abuse of women.

#### **AO5: Desdemona’s Public Death**

“Desdemona is killed not only by Othello and Iago but also by all those who see her humiliated and beaten in public, and fail to intervene. The **presumption that husband and wife**, even when literally in a public space, **metaphorically inhabit a private space** wherein violence is somehow different from the violence of one man on another **fosters the development of a continuum of violence** that escalates from abuse to beating to killing. **Lodovico’s role**, as a Venetian and a kinsman, is **crucial in the play’s exposure of this pattern.**” - Ruth Vanita, ‘Proper’ Men and ‘Fallen’ Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello

### **Race, Culture & Otherness**

Out of all the characters in *Othello*, Desdemona is probably the one who makes the **fewest** comments about his race. We hear objections to her marriage with Othello on the basis of race, but these always come from others and not from her, implying she doesn’t share the same opinions. People fear Othello has somehow **seduced** or manipulated her, with Brabantio accusing him of **“enchantment” (Act 1 Scene 2)** and **“witchcraft” (Act 1 Scene 3)**. The association of black people with the **occult** was a **pervasive**, enduring **stereotype** of the time, and Shakespeare demonstrates its use as a scaremongering tactic, designed to portray Desdemona’s **weakness** and vulnerability. We see this, likewise, in how Othello’s blackness and Desdemona’s whiteness are **juxtaposed** to insinuate her innocence is **jeopardised** by his **malignance**; for example, in the imagery of **“an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe,” (Act 1 Scene 1)**, where **“white”** connotes **purity** and youth whereas **“black”** represents corruption and **malevolence**.

Shakespeare shows how Desdemona’s personality **undermines** these objections. While Brabantio portrays her as a **“maid so tender, fair, and happy,” (Act 1 Scene 2)**, Desdemona speaks to her **“downright violence and storm of fortunes,” (Act 1 Scene 3)** and sees herself as a **“warrior” (Act 3 Scene 4)**. Brabantio doesn’t understand his daughter at all: she is not the



“tender”, **agreeable** damsel he wants her to be. Therefore, Shakespeare argues that the **racist** prejudices of her community are being **projected** onto her. Brabantio resents the idea of a black man marrying into his family and so pushes the same **suspicious** onto his daughter; Desdemona, as Othello’s wife, becomes a **blank canvas** for the opinions of others. This idea is developed further when Iago takes advantage of her position in his plot against Othello, **convincing** him that her “**nature [is] erring from itself**” and will seek out “**matches / Of her own clime,**” (Act 3 Scene 3). Even Othello starts ascribing her with opinions she doesn’t possess. Because of this, Shakespeare presents the myth of the **defenseless**, white woman and the menacing black man as a narrative written as **propaganda**. The narrative is used by Brabantio (unsuccessfully) and Iago (successfully) to push their own agenda.

Although Desdemona resists the ubiquitous **racism** of her society, Shakespeare shows such ideologies are so endemic that she can’t help but **absorb** some of them. She declares to the Senate, “**I saw Othello’s visage in my mind,**” (Act 1 Scene 3); initially, this appears to be a brave **revelation**, suggesting she was **blind** to the colour of his skin and instead saw his true “**visage**” to be who he was on the inside. However, it implies she loves Othello in spite of his race; the metaphor of seeing his “**visage**” in her “**mind**” implies a type of **cognitive dissonance**, as though Desdemona is picturing him as a white man, holding the two views in her mind simultaneously. Shakespeare hints that her society’s prejudices force her to hold **conflicting** views and put her under **stress**.

In a similar fashion, Desdemona’s love for Othello can be interpreted as an example of **fetishisation**. She refers to Othello’s “**honours and valiant parts,**” (Act 1 Scene 3), implying she has **idealised** him as a hero or warrior. Othello recalls how Desdemona “**devour[ed] up [his] discourse**” and “**wished / That heaven had made her such a man,**” (Act 1 Scene 3); Shakespeare presents Othello as Desdemona’s ideal husband, conjured from **stories** and **exotic** tales rather than reality. We hear of Othello’s “**battles**” and “**sieges**” and how he was “**sold to slavery**” (Act 1 Scene 3); he says of Desdemona, “**She loved me for the dangers I had passed,**” (Act 1 Scene 3). Shakespeare portrays

Desdemona’s **romanticisation** of Othello’s heritage and hardship. His stories closely resemble the **sensationalised** tales of adventurers returning from abroad in Shakespeare’s time; this could mean she is most **fascinated** by the romance and **thrill** of it, so that she is in love with an

#### **AO5: Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory focuses on the **impact imperialism and colonisation has had on the world and how we experience it**. Specifically, it looks at the identity of decolonised societies and how it has been shaped by the Western cultures who colonised it. Postcolonialism seeks to **rectify the imbalance** between the ‘colonist’ and the ‘colonised’ by allowing members of colonised societies to speak for themselves.

A key motivation of colonialism was to **indoctrinate non-European countries into European culture**, so that this new colony could **act as an extension** of the **European ‘mother country’**. Postcolonialists examine the impact of this on the identities of those subjected to this treatment. Even if postcolonial theory didn’t exist in Shakespeare’s time, this doesn’t stop us from **reading ‘Othello’ through a postcolonial lens**. The knowledge we have accumulated about colonial practices and their impact give the play meaning that it perhaps didn’t possess at the time of writing, but this doesn’t make these readings any less valid. Considering this is a good way to **contrast the perspectives of a contemporary audience with those of a modern audience**.



idea rather than a person. Furthermore, you could argue that because Desdemona, living as a woman in Venetian society, is so **restrained** by rules and convention that the far flung places and **scandals** of Othello's past appeal to her desire for **escape**. In contrast to the reproach and hostility that defines others' reactions to Othello's race, Shakespeare offers in Desdemona an **inverted** version of their racism: her perspective is equally **reductive** and naive, as she glorifies his past and idealises his **Other** status.

#### **AQ5: is 'Othello' about race?**

"To Shakespeare, who always reads deeper than others, it is **on the surface a matter of colour**, but at **bottom a matter of racial divergence that amounts to an incompatibility of character.**" - Alexander W. Crawford (1916)

"Othello self-destructively **internalises the prevailing racism**, while Desdemona [...] remains an idealised, virtuous woman - keeping alive the image of a **besieged, white femininity so crucial to the production of the black man as a 'savage'**." - Jyotsna Singh (2004)

"To talk about race in Othello is inevitably to fall into some degree of **anachronism**, while **to ignore it is to efface something fundamental to the tragedy.**" - Michael Neill

## **SYMBOLISM**

Shakespeare uses the construct of Desdemona to explore the different **archetypes**, myths, and narratives that surround **femininity** and womanhood. Desdemona is subjected to **symbolism** and surmise as much by the men in the play than by Shakespeare or his audience; to Othello, she symbolises lost female **purity**, while to Iago, she acts as a physical manifestation of his victory over Othello. Both men use her as a trophy for their **regained** manhood. As Desdemona 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 Desdemona's character while actively **questioning** and challenging that same practice.

In the text, we see how Desdemona's **individuality** is lost to the opinions and perspectives of others. She becomes an ideal or concept rather than a real person; this **dehumanisation** allows Othello 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 Desdemona as a martyr for womanhood, except instead of being killed for holding a particular religious belief, she is killed for merely **existing**.



While a lot of Shakespeare's characters are given more depth through his use of symbolism and imagery, for Desdemona, symbolism serves to **deny** her individuality. She is **reduced**, by the other characters, to an **oversimplified** emblem of the ideal woman. 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.

## Purity & Chastity

Through the course of the play, we see Desdemona 'fall' in the eyes of her **community**, going from a **paragon** of virtue to a **"cunning whore" (Act 4 Scene 2)**. Her innocence is only proven after her death - when it is too late. The audience knows throughout that she is innocent, and this **situational irony** serves to demonstrate how a woman's **reputation** can be **ruined** by rumour and gossip alone. Shakespeare shows that a woman's purity is a product of her reputation, **designated** by her peers, and so can be taken away by them as easily as it is given. There is no such thing as 'female purity' because the concept is not established in **truth**.

At the beginning of the play, Shakespeare portrays Desdemona as the **embodiment** of purity through the **judgements** of the men in her life. Brabantio describes her as **"a maid so tender, fair, and happy," (Act 1 Scene 2)** and accuses Othello of **"abus[ing] her delicate youth," (Act 1 Scene 2)**, depicting Desdemona's innocence as a **tangible** thing that will be corrupted by him. Likewise, Cassio calls her **"a maid / That paragons description" and "the riches of the ship" (Act 2 Scene 1)**, **objectifying** her and her innocence. The metaphor **"the riches of the ship"** implies her purity is something that must be protected, else it will be stolen by other men. Also noteworthy is the repeated use of **"maid"** when referring to Desdemona; the noun refers to her **virginity** and chastity, demonstrating the **link** between a woman's innocence and her sexuality. Desdemona is the ideal woman because she hasn't been **'corrupted'** by sex. Shakespeare may be arguing that men only cared about a woman's innocence because of its significance for faithfulness in marriage. In keeping with this, when Othello asks, **"She is protectress of her honour too. / May she give that?" (Act 4 Scene 1)**, we understand that women were charged with **maintaining** their reputations and preventing themselves from becoming 'fallen women'. Desdemona's **"honour"** has serious consequence for Othello, as it determines his own reputation and also **guarantees** she has been faithful to him. Shakespeare emphasises that women were symbols of a **man's virility**, meaning they made men vulnerable. A 'pure' woman was sought for this reason. Desdemona's purity is forced upon her by others and she is **expected** to uphold it.

Though Shakespeare illustrates **female purity's** invention by men as a way to assuage their own **ego**, he still shows that Desdemona has taken on these **duties**. She tells Othello, **"If to preserve this**

### AO5: Female Sexuality & The Handkerchief

"Male anxiety toward female erotic power is channeled into a strategy of containment. Through this strategy, the threat of female erotic power is psychically contained by means of a metaphoric and dramatic transformation of women in jewels, statues, and corpses." - Valerie Traub



vessel for my lord / From any other foul unlawful touch / Be not to be a strumpet, I am none,” (Act 4 Scene 2), conveying her **willingness** to please him and her **loyalty** to him. The phrase “**preserve this vessel for my lord**” presents her body as Othello’s property, and her **objectification** of herself further demonstrates how deeply **instilled** the narrative of female purity is. Moreover, the imagery alludes to the **sanctity of life**, presenting the female form as something **sacred**, created by God for each woman’s “**lord**”. Shakespeare implies that while women don’t choose to be “**vessel[s]**” of purity, they obediently take on the **responsibility**. Consequently, all women rise to meet the **expectations** put upon them, regardless of **justice** or choice.

To Othello, the tragedy of Desdemona’s deceit is her **contaminated** innocence. He mourns her purity, saying, “**The fountain from the which my current runs / [...] To be discarded thence / Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in!**” (Act 4 Scene 2). The metaphor depicts Desdemona as the “**fountain**” that supplies Othello’s “**current**”, illustrating a **man’s stake** in his wife’s chastity. Desdemona’s purity holds **grievous** consequences for Othello’s **manhood**; this is why a woman’s **virginity** and **chastity** were held to such high esteem in society. The imagery of “**foul toads**” evokes disgust, implying he is physically repulsed by the concept of an **impure wife**. He goes on to ask, “**Was this fair paper, this most godly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon?**” (Act 4 Scene 2); again, Shakespeare shows how women were viewed as **perfect objects**, vulnerable at all times to **corruption**. The conceit of “**paper**” and writing conveys the importance of **reputation** in a woman’s purity; alternatively, Shakespeare may once more be arguing that female purity is a narrative **conjured** by men.

Othello’s response to Desdemona’s **lost innocence** is to restore it through her murder. To him, she becomes not just a symbol of her own lost innocence, but a symbol for all **fallen women**; as such, killing her will **symbolically** kill all impure women, **liberating** men from adultery for good. He calls her murder a “**sacrifice**” and an “**honourable murder**” (Act 5 Scene 2), implying her life must be lost for the good of a greater cause. Shakespeare portrays women as “**sacrifice[s]**” to male ego, as they are subjected to violence and **oppression** at the mercy of men. That her murder takes place on the **marital bed**, “**the bed she hath contaminated**” (Act 4 Scene 1) adds to the **ritualistic** elements of her death. Othello believes the murder is **justified** because of the affront to his own pride. The bed is a symbol for her **deceit**, in his opinion; killing her there **reduces** her to her infidelity, as Shakespeare implies a woman’s **worth** was reduced to her chastity.

### Tokens of Love

Shakespeare constructs Othello and Desdemona’s marriage around various **tokens**: most notably, the **handkerchief** and the wedding sheets. These items trace the **journey** of their relationship and serve as a symbol for Desdemona’s **reputation**. In Jacobean society, a woman’s reputation was all she had, and her **reputation** could make or break her. A woman’s reputation could easily be ruined by the **word** of a man, and fallen women could not **regain** their reputations. A woman’s reputation was given to her by society, and so **defined** her by how she



appeared or how people wanted to view her, not by who she was; this is reflected in Shakespeare's use of **trivial objects** to symbolise Desdemona's reputation. Equally, the use of tokens in a marriage symbolises **confinement** and the **ownership** of one by the other; Desdemona is charged with serving Othello, and the handkerchief ties her to this **duty**.

The handkerchief is a **pivotal** part of Iago's plan: when Othello sees Cassio with it, he is convinced once and for all that Desdemona has been **unfaithful** to him. He places all trust in the handkerchief, a physical token of his love for Desdemona, rather than having **faith** in his wife's word. He tells her, "**Our new heraldry is hands, not hearts,**" (Act 3 Scene 4) and to

**AO5: The Worth of the Handkerchief**  
"For most of the characters, the handkerchief is reproducible, exchangeable, and has a certain cash value. Furthermore, although it circulates widely, everyone recognises it as private property. [...] For Desdemona, the handkerchief **balances between the everyday and the sacred**, becoming a **highly valued love token** that is nonetheless commensurable with monetary value." - Paul Yachnin

Iago says, "**He had my handkerchief,**" (Act 4 Scene 1). Shakespeare shows how marriage is a **superficial construct**, based in tokens and **appearances** rather than "**hearts**". Similarly, Cassio having Othello's "**handkerchief**" is equivalent to him having his wife: Desdemona is just another object to be **exchanged** between people, like the handkerchief. Shakespeare shows how men **objectify** women by illustrating how Desdemona's **faithfulness** is symbolically **transmuted** into the handkerchief. Equally, the **fixation** on the handkerchief hints at a materialistic, **one-dimensional society**.

Furthermore, because Othello takes Cassio's possession of "**[his] handkerchief**" as **proof** of Desdemona's **deceit**, Shakespeare uses the handkerchief as a symbol for Desdemona's loyalty and purity. Othello tells Desdemona, "**To lose't or give't away were such perdition / As nothing else could match,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), suggesting giving away the handkerchief is the same as giving away her **body** or honour through **promiscuity**. 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 her good name and innocence are touched and so **defiled** by each individual. The audience knows Desdemona is faithful and so the handkerchief's symbolism is **distorted** or inverted; this **situational irony** emphasises the **errors** and lies in reputation, portraying it as **slander**.

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.

In the same way that the handkerchief draws **parallels** between the three women, Desdemona's wedding **sheets** commemorate the **unbreakable** bond between her and Emilia. In death, the two women lie next to each other on the sheets, illustrating that **domestic abuse** and the murder of women **transcends** class divides. Desdemona views her sheets as proof of her innocence,

asking Emilia, "**Lay on my bed my wedding sheets,**" (Act 4 Scene 2) and "**If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of those same sheets,**" (Act 4 Scene 3). One can argue the wedding sheets represent a **transmutation** or transferral of the handkerchief; now it is in the possession of Desdemona and so is hers to **control**. She trusts Emilia with her reputation, conveying **female solidarity**. The symbolism of her "**wedding sheets**" acting as her "**shroud**" suggests Desdemona maintains her loyalty to Othello even in death, such that her loyalty to him **overrules** her identity; alternatively, Shakespeare presents marriage as a death sentence. Presenting the women's dead bodies on the wedding sheets implies all women are innocent and **pure**: it is male violence that **corrupts** them. Shakespeare shows that women are cursed to take their innocence to the grave; while alive, their virtue is at the mercy of reputation, and the truth of their **guiltlessness** isn't enough to save them from **slander**.

**AO5: 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

### Power of Speech

**Language** and **communication** are a significant part of *Othello's* plot, with Shakespeare using it to identify which characters hold **power** and **status** at any one time. Othello successfully convinces the Senate - and Brabantio - to accept his marriage to Desdemona through his **eloquence** and **articulacy**; Iago manipulates everyone around him by employing **euphemism** and inflammatory imagery to provoke them. Moreover, language is the conduit for **civility** and respectability, separating high society from the **violence** and barbarity stereotypically associated with more **primitive** culture. Therefore, when Desdemona is given her own voice, Shakespeare gives her access to power and society. He suggests women can only feel **belonging** when they are allowed to speak for themselves. Because women weren't allowed to participate in government or be heard in the public sphere, Shakespeare **subverts** convention by depicting an **assertive**, strong-willed woman who has a place in society.

We first meet Desdemona when she is summoned to give her account of her relationship with Othello; it was **unusual** to listen to a woman's perspective on her marriage, thus setting a **precedent** regarding a woman's place in **discourse**. However, Desdemona must depend on Othello to make this space for her in the conversation: he asks the Senate, "**I do beseech you /**



**Send for the lady [...] Let her have your voice,” (Act 1 Scene 3).** Though Othello respects Desdemona’s “**voice**”, he must still **defer** to his superiors; Shakespeare examines how men control **access** to power and authority, hence **controlling** the conversation. The Senate is in a position of passive **privilege**, conveyed through the passive verb “**let**”. Women have a voice, Shakespeare demonstrates, but they are at the **mercy** of men whether they are permitted use of it.

#### **AO5: LOVE & CIVILISATION**

In the essay ‘Shakespeare’s tragedies of love’, critic Catherine Bates calls love “**a fundamentally creative force and as such it is opposed to the forces of destruction. [...] It is therefore the great civilising force, the energy that counters anarchy and chaos with order and degree. [...] Love sponsors the forces of life, creating human families and social groups in the teeth of man’s instinct for destruction - both self-destruction and the destruction of the other.**”

Applying these ideas to Othello and Desdemona’s relationship, she writes, “**For, if Othello conquers Desdemona with the sheer irresistibility of his tale, so he falls victim to the sly suggestions and expert handling of Iago. [...] Utterly taken in, Othello gazes on while Iago ‘begins the story’ (4.1.127), and he is so convinced by what he sees and hears that ultimately he too rewrites his wife: ‘Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write “whore” upon?’ (4.2.70-1).**”

Desdemona and Othello’s relationship is **established** in **communication**, portraying them as **equals** in marriage. Othello stands up for her voice, which indicates he respects her point of view greatly. When Othello told stories of his life, Desdemona “**devour[ed] up [his] discourse,**” (Act 1 Scene 3), presenting her with an **active role** in discussion. The exchange of words is equivalent to the **exchange** of **power**; Othello recalls Desdemona saying “**she wished / That heaven had made her such a man,**” (Act 1 Scene 3), indicating she took the initiative in their **courtship**. Once Desdemona is summoned to address the Senate, she doesn’t shy from her wishes, telling her father, “**I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor my lord,**” (Act 1 Scene 3). The verbs “**challenge**” and “**profess**” connote **authority** and **confidence**, as Desdemona is able to **advocate** for herself with **language**.

In contrast, Othello becomes the person actively **denying** Desdemona her voice. At first, he silences her temporarily in the course of conversation, **interrupting** her plea for Cassio’s reinstatement, “**Prithee no more,**” (Act 3 Scene 3) and, later, cutting her off once more to demand she show him “**the handkerchief!**” (Act 3 Scene 4). Soon, he resorts to **violence**, “**strik[ing] her**” (Act 4 Scene 1). This indicates his **lost respect** for her voice because she is now a ‘**fallen woman**’, and is paralleled by the **breakdown** in their communication: Desdemona tells him, “**I understand a fury in your words, / But not the words,**” (Act 4 Scene 2). Their shared lines, which once were used to convey **romantic poetry**, are in conflict: “**What, not a whore?**” “**No, as I shall be saved,**” (Act 4 Scene 2). Othello no longer listens to Desdemona and has restricted her access to his “**words**”, excluding her from the conversation.



Shakespeare implies Desdemona doesn't have the tools to **defend** herself or protest her innocence because her voice has been **denied** her.

When Othello **murders** Desdemona, he **silences** her permanently. He accuses her of "**perjury**" and mocks her for "**pray[ing]**" (**Act 5 Scene 2**), indicating her words have become **meaningless** to him. Shakespeare argues that, in patriarchal society, a woman's voice is at the whim of men. A woman is allowed **access** to her voice only as long as what she has to say is deemed **acceptable** by men; in this way, men can **gate-keep** political discourse and ensure power remains within their own ranks. Shakespeare draws comparisons between Desdemona's death and the silencing of her voice; in this play, where words are **social currency** and can **sculpt truth**, being denied your voice is a **metaphorical death** in its own right.

As she dies, Desdemona's deathbed **confession** maintains her innocence: "**Falsely murdered! [...] A guiltless death I die,**" (**Act 5 Scene 2**). Typically, deathbed confessions concern **repressed guilt** and are trusted as true. Thus, Desdemona's proclamation symbolises a **lost testimony**, a truth restrained and repressed until now. Shakespeare **inverts** the typical 'confession' by making it about innocence rather than guilt, perhaps reflecting that the most **unexpected** thing in the eyes of Othello was for Desdemona to be innocent. Furthermore, Shakespeare presents death as a type of **liberation** for her; in death she is able to defend herself because she is removed from the discourse entirely. Her voice is no longer subjected to the same **scrutiny** and **restriction**. The only way for women to have their voice **respected** and heard is to create a new discourse.

#### **A05: Post-Structuralist Theory**

"The book **revolves around this myth** [i.e., **that the book is uncannily alive**]; but in the process of its formation the book takes a stand regarding this myth, exposing it. This does not mean that the book is able to become its own criticism: it gives **an implicit critique of its ideological content**, if only because it resists being incorporated into the flow of ideology in order to give a determinate representation of it." - Pierre Machery, Marxist & Post-structuralist literary critic

### **Barbary & the Willow Song**

There are only three women featured in *Othello*, but Shakespeare introduces us to a fourth through the **childhood** remembrances of Desdemona. While Emilia helps her prepare for bed, Desdemona informs her, "**My mother had a maid called Barbary: / She was in love, and he she loved proved mad / And did forsake her. She had a song of willow; / [...] And she died singing it,**" (**Act 4 Scene 3**). Shakespeare emphasises the narrative of **tragic femininity**, where a woman's life is dependent on the success of her **romance** and ultimately **dies** alone



and ashamed. **Barbary** never appears on stage and her death precedes the events of the play; this choice can be interpreted as a way to accentuate the **mythic**, archetypal quality of Barbary's life. She **loses** her identity, and only fellow women **remember** her and carry on her **memory**. Alternatively, her mythic status makes tragedy feel like an **inevitable destiny** for women. Shakespeare welcomes the comparison between Desdemona and Barbary, as the former says, "**That song tonight / Will not go from my mind,**" (Act 4 Scene 3), **foreshadowing** her murder. We are confronted with the **uncomfortable undeniability** of her fate. Barbary is a symbol for **female oppression** and tragedy, while symbolising Desdemona's future.

This scene is constructed around **female intimacy** and understanding. Emilia helps Desdemona get ready for bed, while Desdemona shares this sentimental detail from her past. She mentions **dying "before"** Emilia and asks whether the itch in her eyes "**bode[s] weeping**" (Act 4 Scene 3), thus entrusting Emilia with her darkest **fears**. The **dramatic irony** of Emilia helping Desdemona **prepare** for her **murder** adds another layer of tragedy to the ensemble: women can only support and console each other in the face of male violence, and only women can carry on their sisters' memories. By singing the song herself, Desdemona symbolically takes on **Barbary's voice**; this brings all women together in love and in **death**.

In addition, the scene contrasts the two women's opinions on **adultery**. The **Willow Song** introduces the concept, with the lines "**Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve -**" and "**If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men,**" (Act 4 Scene 3) embodying the culture surrounding **cuckoldry**. It is suggested that a woman is solely **responsible** for her failing marriage, just as Desdemona accepts the **guilt** for her death; yet, equally, the song echoes Emilia's sentiment that "**The ills we do, their ills instruct us so,**" (Act 4 Scene 3). This **contradiction** may be because the two lines represent the **perspectives** of the woman and man, respectively. Alternatively, the song conveys the **conflict** and **torture** associated with **jealousy**, the force that drives the play forward. Desdemona asks, "**Wouldst thou do such a deed [as adultery] for all the world?**", to which Emilia replies, "**It is a great price / For a small vice,**" (Act 4 Scene 3). Faced with her impending death (which she suspects) and the **deadly truth** of **male jealousy**, Desdemona remains **loyal** to her husband, calling a woman's adultery an "**abuse**" of "**such gross kind**" that she will never commit, "**by this heavenly light,**" (Act 4 Scene 3). There is no doubt that Desdemona is faithful and steadfast in her love, and so she **accepts** the fate of Barbary as her own.

On a **structural** level, the inclusion of **song** introduces a **false sense** of **calm** and **balance** before the chaos of Act 5. Desdemona's vehement **rejection** of infidelity adds to this; unlike Emilia, she takes the 'proper' path and swears allegiance to traditional conventions of **morality**. The song portrays Desdemona's **gentleness** and vulnerability; alternatively, it implies she has made **peace** with her fate. Despite the calming influence of the song, there is **tension** accompanying the sense there is no way out. That she must die so soon after pledging allegiance to her husband, in spite of his **abuse** of her, is so **tragic** as to imply she dies a **martyr** for her cause - killed for her naive faithfulness and unchanging love. Shakespeare



argues these qualities have no place in patriarchal society, where **sexual jealousy** and **masculine virility** rule.

## Property, & The 'Merchant' of Venice

In the Jacobean era, Venice was a symbol for **culture** and **civilisation**, known for its thriving early **capitalism**. It was a **Republic**, where the wealthier merchant classes controlled the state, and dominated **trade links** with the East and North Africa; in comparison, England had only just begun trading overseas. As such, Shakespeare examines the influence of trade and economy

**AO5: Ownership of Women**  
 Kenneth Burke describes Othello's stake in Desdemona is **"ownership in the profoundest sense of ownership, the property of human affections, as fetishistically localised in the object of possession, while the possessor is himself possessed by his very engrossment"**.  
 In the essay "Proper" Men and "Fallen" Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in 'Othello', Ruth Vanita writes, **"[Othello] describes murderous jealousy as innate in the husband-wife relationship which posits the wife as the exclusive possession of the husband and is thus at odds with the human condition wherein one can never know another person's inmost thoughts and desires"**.

on **social relations**, as a new type of social class emerges. In the context of **women's bodies** being the legal property of their fathers and husbands, the play can be read as a dispute between **rival** merchants for the ownership of Desdemona. At first, the **dispute** is between Othello and Brabantio: her father asks Othello **"Where hast thou stowed my daughter?" (1.2)** and claims **"[she] is stol'n from me" (1.3)**. Shakespeare

portrays Desdemona as a **valuable possession** and Othello a thief. Later, the dispute is between Othello and all other men in the play - **everyone** becomes a rival in his eyes.

As Iago's accusations and conspiracies take hold, Othello's investment in Desdemona becomes **solely physical**. He is overly concerned with her body - how **pure** it is and who has access to it. He is **dismayed** by the **"curse of marriage, that we can call these delicate creatures ours / and not their appetites!" (3.3)**. Shakespeare shows Othello desiring total **control** over Desdemona, the way one might have total control over property or a **trade**. Men require constant **assurance** that they are in charge. They need a **guarantee**, made physical by a **woman's body**. Therefore, women's free will is at odds with men's lust for power, putting the two in constant conflict.

The symbolism of women as **economic property** often intersects with the theme of **cuckoldry**. As women were viewed as their husbands' property, cuckoldry, in Jacobean society and within the culture of the play, would be a crime akin to **theft**. Women were prizes and trophies; sleeping with another man's wife was the ultimate insult because you were removing the visible **symbol** of his **virility**. Othello refers to Desdemona as the place **"where [he has] garnered up [his] heart, where either [he] must live or bear no life, / The fountain from the which [his] current runs or else dries up," (4.2)**. The **physicality** of this **imagery** emphasises how he has invested himself in her body, the way a **tradesman** invests in a share of land. While the allusions to death - **"or bear no life"**, **"or else dries up"** - may suggest his love for her sustains his life, it likely also refers to the issue of having an **heir**. Shakespeare implies Desdemona's



value to Othello is **dependent** on her ability to carry his child and thus carry on his **legacy**. If she has slept with Cassio, Othello cannot be certain the child is his, thus threatening his **manhood** and his **societal power**.

## 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.

Where others, such as Iago, call Othello "**Moor**", Desdemona addresses him with "**my lord**", indicating she **respects** him as a person and isn't a **deliberate** participant in her culture's racism. As the term "**lord**" bestows power and authority on Othello, Shakespeare implies Desdemona accepts Othello's position in the **social structure**. The name "**Moor**" is used to alienate Othello, insinuating he is an **outsider** without a rightful place in society, whereas Desdemona integrates him into the hierarchy the same way any other man would be.



Desdemona's **whiteness and femininity** is exploited by her fellow Venetians to perpetuate the **myths** surrounding Moors. Brabantio declares that Othello has "**stowed**" her away and "**enchanted**" her in "**chains of magic**" (**Act 1 Scene 2**). This depicts Othello as Desdemona's captor and draws on the **stereotype** that Moors were in league with the Devil or the occult. Furthermore, it implies Desdemona isn't capable of making decisions for herself because she is under the influence of "**witchcraft**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**). In the same vein, Othello is depicted as a sexual predator, with Iago **torturing** Brabantio with the images, "**The Devil will make a grandsire of you,**" and "**your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs,**" (**Act 1 Scene 1**). This is in keeping with the stereotype that Moors were sexually **perverted, lustful, and barbaric**. Brabantio fabricates a **narrative** wherein Othello holds great power over Desdemona because he is a black male: "**To fall in love with what she feared to look on?**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**). Shakespeare illustrates that Desdemona's identity is **capitalised** on by her peers as a **political tool**.

## 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**.

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**.

Though we, the audience, know of Iago's lies, Shakespeare still takes the opportunity to introduce a **shadow of doubt** into Desdemona's intentions. Iago calls her a "**super-subtle Venetian**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**) and Othello entitles her as "**the cunning whore of Venice,**" (**Act 4 Scene 2**), associating Venice with **feminine wiles** and **conspiracy**. Equally, Brabantio warns Othello, "**She has deceived her father and may thee,**" (**Act 1 Scene 3**), a sentiment that is later echoed by Iago, "**She did deceive her father, marrying you,**" (**Act 3 Scene 3**).

Desdemona's loyalty to Othello is **manipulated** and used against her, viewed instead as proof of her **duplicity**. She is resented for her class and culture. Othello laments, "**I do but say what she is: so delicate with her needle, an admirable musician,**" and Iago replies, "**She's the worse for all this,**" (**Act 4 Scene 1**): Shakespeare shows that Desdemona's civility becomes



proof of her **wickedness**. This character of the “**cunning**”, deceitful Venetian “**whore**” is created by Othello and Iago, and overwrites Desdemona’s **true personality**.

## 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 Iago’s own character, as his exterior is so deeply **embroiled** in conflict with his interior. You could argue the conflict parallels the battle between Iago and Desdemona for Othello’s trust and **respect**. Cyprus’ isolation reflects the **psychological conditions** Othello and Desdemona are thrown into under Iago’s manipulations - a fitting setting to intensify the feelings of claustrophobia and **helplessness** they experience.

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 experienced by Desdemona. Just as she is a stranger to the **warfare** of Cyprus and Othello’s military lifestyle, she is oblivious of the **psychological** warfare occurring between Iago and Othello. With military **precision** and strategy, Iago is waging a battle against Othello to regain

### **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.**”



his **masculinity**, but Desdemona is unaware of this feud. It's impossible for her to understand what is happening and why Othello is so **angry** with her.

This choice of setting and time period evokes another example of typically Shakespearean **dramatic irony**. It was believed that **victory** over the Turks came 'too late' to help Cyprus; the 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. Desdemona, like Cyprus, is an '**easy target**'; Cyprus was **vulnerable** to Turkish threat because it was so isolated and removed from the Christian empire, and Desdemona is **vulnerable** to Iago because she is **alienated**, far from home, and a woman.

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 Othello's character wrestle with those same **ideals**. Desdemona, the **fair** and gentle maiden, represents the **corruption** of Venetian calm and order by Cyprus' **savagery**.

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 Desdemona'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 Othello and Desdemona's **romance** is overtaken by Iago's violence and **hatred**.

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.

## 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 semantic field of religion representing Desdemona and Othello's marriage functions as a point of tension within this context of Christianity vs. Islam. Othello is a "**Moor**", someone who typically is Muslim, though he has shown **allegiance** to the Christian faith while serving Venice. Desdemona dedicates herself to him: "**To his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate,**" and "**the rites for which I love him,**" (Act 1 Scene 3). "**Consecrate**" and "**rites**" hold significant **ecclesiastical** meaning, presenting a Christian woman **worshipping** a man who, to many, represents heresy, **heathenism**, and non-Christian faith. Desdemona's **faithfulness** to Othello would be controversial and may seem like **betrayal** of her Christian faith, and Shakespeare uses religious imagery to emphasise this. On the other hand, the religious imagery used challenges the **paganism** and occult implied in Brabantio's accusations of "**witchcraft**" (Act 1 Scene 3): **witchcraft** is forbidden in Christianity, but Desdemona likens her love to a **Christian act**, restoring their relationship's decorum in the eyes of society.

## 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

### **A05: 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*

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 Desdemona. The accusation of her **aberrant sexuality** condemns her to being a devil; she is **demonised** by her husband, "**You, mistress, / That have the office opposite to Saint Peter, / And keeps the gates of hell!**" (Act 4 Scene 2). Shakespeare implies the pedagogy of the Christian Church is exploited with the goal of controlling and **oppressing** women. In contrast, Desdemona epitomises **forgiveness** and repentance. When Othello tells her, "**Think on thy sins,**" she responds, "**They are loves I bear to you,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). This exchange resembles a **Catholic confession**, and shows Desdemona serving Othello in all she does.

### 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.

#### **AO5: Othello's Jealous Nature**

"Not easily jealous'. It's the most appalling bit of self-deception. He's the **most easily jealous man that anybody's ever written about**. The minute he suspects, or thinks he has the smallest grounds for suspecting, Desdemona, he wishes to think her guilty, he wishes to." - Kenneth Tyan

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**.

Desdemona's character acts as spokesperson for these views. She tells Emilia, "**My noble Moor / Is true of mind and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are,**" (Act 3 Scene 4). This depicts the **dehumanisation** of those who act on jealous thoughts. Desdemona naively believes Othello is superior to the "**baseness**" of such a **wretched emotion** as jealousy, but **dramatic irony** contrives to prove her wrong. Jealousy is an inevitable part of human nature: even the "**noble**" Othello succumbs to it. Desdemona says, "**Alas the day, I never gave him cause,**" (Act 3 Scene 4), as she learns the harsh lesson that jealousy is irrational and **unjust**.



## 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.

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

### **AO5: 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*

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 reflected in Othello's approach to the murder, declaring "**the justice of it pleases,**" (Act 4 Scene 1), calling Desdemona a "**perjured woman,**" and accusing her, "**[You] mak'st me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice,**" (Act 5 Scene 2). Othello sees himself as an **executioner** acting on behalf of the law; furthermore, he believes the act is an **honourable** one. However, when Desdemona cries out, "**O, falsely, falsely murdered!**" (Act 5 Scene 2), Shakespeare calls into question this **violent** aspect of culture. Her exclamation may refer to her **innocence**, or it can be interpreted to mean that the justification itself - that a woman deserves death for **infidelity** - is "**false**". He argues that giving a man authority over life and death forms a **system** that is vulnerable to pride



and **ego**. If an innocent woman can die at the hands of this **'justice system'**, then the whole thing is **corrupt** and **invalid**.

## 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'**.

Desdemona begins as a **"maiden"** (**Act 1 Scene 2**) in the eyes of all around her, but by the play's end is given the allotted role of **"whore"** (**Act 4 Scene 2**). Shakespeare implies these archetypes say more of the men who bestow them on others, than of the women themselves; they are **narratives** constructed to **serve** a man's needs, or to serve a **wider political motive**. Othello justifies Desdemona's death by saying, **"She must die, else she'll betray more men,"** (**Act 5 Scene 2**). This shows that the **"whore"** was perceived as a **threat** to masculinity and **manhood** as a whole; because of this, women seen as **"whore[s]"** were **punished** accordingly, thus **eradicating** the threat.

### **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

Desdemona's **descent** from **"maiden"** to **"whore"** 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.

