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Analyzing “The Tragedy of Othello” Through a Feminist Lens

Lessened. Vitiated. Diminished. These are words to describe how women were treated in Shakespeare’s era. The culture of the people during that time is portrayed on the play “The Tragedy of Othello” by making women seem as property instead of actual human beings. Both Desdemona and Emilia are not taken into account for the suspicions their husbands have of them cheating. Desdemona seeks freedom from her father’s controlling attitude through her marriage with Othello and it is granted at first, however, the freedom quickly fades away. Bianca is treated as an object by the men and women of this play since she sells her body in order to survive. Emilia betrays Desdemona’s friendship in order to comply with her husband’s wishes.

Hatred in this play is caused by jealousy from the men towards each other. Iago hates Othello since he envies his promotion. He also suspects Othello of bedding his wife, Emilia which is why he destroys Desdemona’s reputation in order to be “...evened with him, wife for wife” (Iago, Act 2 Scene 1). Iago then plants, on Othello, the idea of Desdemona sleeping with Cassio, one of his good friends. “In sleep I heard him say 'Sweet Desdemona, let us be wary, let us hide our love'” (Iago, Act 3 Scene 3). Iago is telling Othello how Cassio thinks of Desdemona at night. Othello does not even think about what Desdemona has to say, he just assumes she was guilty of such accusations. Desdemona’s voice was not taken into account when deciding her own fate. “O, devil, devil! If that the earth could teem with woman's tears, each drop she falls would prove a crocodile. out of my sight!” (Othello, Act 4 Scene 1). Othello hits Desdemona as a

punishment for her “sins” and is told to leave as she responds, crying, “I will not stay to offend you” (Desdemona, Act 4 Scene 1) which shows how she was viewed as no more than property.

During Shakespeare’s era, women who sold their bodies for sexual needs of men, or prostitutes, were seen as society’s garbage. Bianca was a prostitute who was often used by Cassio. Everyone sees Bianca as an object rather than a person, Iago sees her as “a creature that dotes on Cassio—as 'tis the strumpet's plague to beguile many and be beguiled by one” (Iago, Act 4 Scene 1). Bianca is in love with Cassio and she wants to marry him in order to be seen as a respectable woman, however, Cassio thinks of her as joke. It is clear to us that Cassio does not take seriously since Iago asks if he will marry Bianca and Cassio responds “Ha, ha, ha!... I marry her!--what? A customer! I pr'ythee, bear some chairty to my wit; do not think it so unwholesome;--ha, ha, ha!” (Cassio, Act 4 Scene 1), she is nothing but an object for his sexual needs. This is how women who were in dire need of money and had no other choice but to sell their bodies were viewed back in Shakespeare’s time.

Women back then had to comply to their husband’s desires without questioning him. Iago is not the affectionate type of husband which is why Emilia does everything for him in order to receive some love. She betrayed Desdemona by stealing her handkerchief just as her “...wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to...” (Emilia, Act 3 Scene 3). Emilia stole the “napkin” since she has “...nothing but to please his [Iago’s] fantasy” (Emilia, Act 3 Scene 3). Iago and Emilia’s marriage portrays how women were treated back then. Iago gives a command and Emilia does not think twice about it and does not question her husband’s intentions. She steals the napkin and says “What he will do with it heaven knows, not I” (Emilia, Act 3 Scene 3) which characterizes her as nothing more than a servant who is so desperate to serve her masters that she does not need a reason to do the prompts given to her.

To conclude, the play “The Tragedy of Othello” by William Shakespeare, portrays how women were seen as back in his time. As shown in the play, women were viewed as property of a man. Just like Desdemona, they had no voice against accusations from their husbands. They had to obey the men’s orders just like Emilia did. And if they had no choice but to sell themselves in order to survive, they were seen as garbage and treated as society’s worst objects just like everyone behaved towards Bianca. Equal rights for men and women were not a popular subject back in Shakespeare’s era.