

***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

Act 4 Scene 3

- Brief conversation between O and D at the opening of the scene – reveals O's transformation
 - *Get you to bed on th' instant...Dismiss your attendant there. Look't be done.*
 - = conversation with D is dominated by **imperatives** – O is taking charge
 - = **Contrast to Act 2 Scene 3** (*All's well now, sweeting; come away to bed*)
 - = shows how O has changed in such a short period of time
 - = transformation from a lover who views his wife as an equal to a patriarchal and brutal husband who views his wife as an inferior
 - D: *I will, my lord*
 - = continues to be submissive and obedient
 - = **Contrast** to her portrayal at the start of the play when she was presented as independent and vocal
- Scene creates a **sense of foreboding of the tragic ending** – the accumulation of factors that hint at Desdemona's death create a **feeling of inevitability to the tragedy's outcome**
 - Order to dismiss Emilia
 - Reminder that the wedding sheets are on the bed
 - **CONTEXT**: Elizabethan custom – wives were sometimes buried in their wedding sheets
 - **Verb shroud** – pre-empts the death shroud used to wrap dead bodies in
 - **AND**: The wedding sheets are **symbolic** of O and D's love and quick marriage which Iago has manipulated to cause their destruction
 - D's language:
 - *If I do die before thee...*
 - = a premonition of coming death
 - **Contrast** to earlier metaphorical references to her death (e.g. to Cassio in Act 3 Scene 3: *Thy solicitor shall rather die than give thy cause away*)
 - **NOW**: No longer ironic, but creation of tension and worry for the audience
 - *My mother had a maid called Barbary [...] and she died singing it. That song tonight will not go from my mind*
 - D equates herself with her mother's maid who died – indication to the audience that (since she sings the song herself) her death is imminent
 - *Mine eyes do itch – does that bode weeping?*
 - D seems to be aware of more sorrow and sadness to come for herself

- The Willow song
 - = a sad song about death – **contrasts** Iago's drinking songs in Act 2 to remind us that his plan of revenge has moved from outrageous plotting that the audience might laugh at and admire to a tragic level that will cause multiple deaths
 - = refers to a *sycamore tree* – a **symbol** of lost love – implies that D has already **metaphorically** lost Othello
- **Creation of tension**
 - *Hark, who is't that knocks? – It's the wind*
 - = almost Gothic imagery – creates an ominous mood of dread
 - = increases tension – audience anticipates that it is O who knocks – they are aware that he will kill D when he enters
- Relationship between Desdemona and Emilia – **contrast** to the relationship between Iago and Othello
 - = male relationships dominated by hierarchy (expressed in military ranks) vs. female relationships present women as almost equals – they speak openly with each other
 - = passivity vs. activity
 - D + E – bound in ignorance and passivity – this scene underlines their helplessness as – despite the sense that something terrible will happen – they can do nothing to prevent it
 - O + I – bound by the vow of revenge – they take the active roles, are the ones that decide over life and death
 - = honest loyalty vs. false loyalty
 - D + E – this scene emphasises the warmth and tenderness between them – E gives honest counsel to D, soothes her to calm her
 - O + I – audience knows that I's loyalty to O is false
- Relationship between Desdemona and Emilia – also evokes **contrasts** between the two women
 - D
 - naïve
 - *I do not think there is such a woman*
 - = continues to emphasise her love for O despite her suffering
 - almost childlike – **language is dominated by questions**
 - almost exaggeratedly pure – **religious/light imagery** – *No, by this heavenly light*
 - she swears by the stars that she would never be disloyal to her husband
 - the **allusion** to heaven also implies that she would offer her soul and her place in heaven rather than betray O
 - E
 - more realistic, rational
 - = serves to exaggerate D's purity and innocence even more

- = this in turn makes her murder in the final scene even more damnable to the audience – it emphasises O's blindness who cannot see D's innocence and virtue despite the exaggerated signs of it
 - almost motherly – soothing comments (*'Tis neither here nor there / Come, come, you talk*)
 - **speech is laced with dramatic irony** – her declamations about *husbands' faults* exactly mirror Othello's behaviour to Desdemona
- Emilia's speech about men and women's roles – an advocate of gender equality?
 - She seems to challenge patriarchal norms and the double standards for men and women in this patriarchal society
 - She demands that women are not treated like objects, but like humans equal to men
 - **Contrast** to the comments and behaviour of the male characters in the play (e.g. Iago's misogyny, his abuse of Emilia's love, Cassio's treatment of Bianca, Brabantio's views on his daughter's position)
 - CRITICAL CONTEXT: A feminist critic might read this as Shakespeare challenging the patriarchal values of his time
- BUT:
 - By the end of the scene, both women are ultimately concerned with obeying their husbands
 - D: *We must not now displease him*
 - E: justifies her claim to adultery by suggesting it could benefit her husband – *who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?*
 - At the end of the play, both female characters that challenge patriarchal values at various points in the play have been killed – by their own husbands!