

Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Study in Feminist Criticism**Alaa .S. Muhsen****Assist Instructor****University of Anbar****College of Education for Humanities****Iraq**

No doubt, William Shakespeare is an iconic figure who affects different fields of knowledge. Although he has died four centuries ago, his plays still acquire the attention of a wide range of scholars all over the world. Moreover, the world-view of Shakespeare varies from one generation to another without a last consensus among them. So, to travel through four centuries of conflicting ideas and opinions is not an easy task to do. On the one hand, Shakespeare is still regarded as a controversial playwright whose plays' ideas are liable to multiple interpretations and because those ideas can be applicable to different cultures and societies.

As far as Shakespeare gender criticism is concerned, it is a doubly significant site of exploration or innovations not only in literary criticism but also in gender criticism as well. Feminist critics of Shakespeare find it difficult to arrive at an agreement about Shakespeare's attitude to women. As such, Shakespeare studies become a rich area of critical discussions and oppositions. As Lynda E. Boose, an author who wrote extensively about Shakespearean studies notes:

Shakespeare is a site of such competitive jostling because Shakespeare is a site of enormous cultural power. As such, he is not only a universally available but likewise a dangerously charged locale, where maneuvers for appropriation, displacement, erasure, and the institutionalization of both cultural and academic privileges are invested with a particular energy that makes the politics within this field the more recognizable and, simultaneously, perhaps the more crucial to recognize.¹

Concerning gender and feminism, some critics see that Shakespeare is a true supporter of women. While other argues that Shakespeare takes a misogynistic position. However, whether Shakespeare is a feminist writer or not, his female characters occupy a great space in his plays.

¹Quoted in Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps, "Shakespeare and Gender: An Introduction," in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, ed. Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), p. 1.

Marianne Novy is one of those critics who has suggested, in 1981 that the feminists' reaction to Shakespeare gender studies is manifested by "the loyalty that a dutiful daughter might have for her father."² This is done by responding not only to the image of Shakespeare as the perfect parent "but also to the institution of Shakespearean criticism."³ In the same vein, Marilyn L. Williamson argues that "gender criticism started in the seventies as feminist criticism which privileged the images of women, in previous criticism often ignored or read to fit a concentration on the male hero and his perspective on the world. This approach led dutiful daughters of Shakespeare to praise his comedic heroines."⁴ Accordingly, feminist critics challenged the question of Man's patriarchy, reconsidered women's position and their potential role in Renaissance society.

Here, I find it important to concentrate on early feminist criticism of Shakespeare to see how they reacted to gender themes in Shakespeare's works.

As we know, early feminist criticism is influenced by New and historical critics. The first group deals with the world of the play and its characters as an aesthetic or psychological piece. While the second group looks at Shakespeare's characters as a historical mirror which reflects the reality and nature of males and females' characters in the Elizabethan world. In this context, Barker and Kamps assert that "in the countless nineteenth-century debates on the nature of women, for example, Shakespeare's women were often discussed alongside historical figures, with the fictional characters given equal weight and often even prominence over actual women."⁵

Although the early criticism of feminists concentrates on images of women and the role of literature as a reflection of reality, one flaw of such criticism is to treat "the female characters as if they were real women with whom they can identify[...], without placing them in the context of

the play and/or the historical situation out of which the play arose.”⁶ In other words, the early feminist criticism has dealt with the images of women and men without

²Marianne Novy, “Demythologizing Shakespeare,” *Women’s Studies* 9 (1981): 17-27.

³Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps, “Shakespeare and Gender: An Introduction,” in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, p. 2.

⁴Marilyn L. Williamson, “Shakespeare Studies: Gender, Materialism, and the Cultural Other,” reviewed by Marilyn L. Williamson, *College English*, v. 58, n. 8 (Dec., 1996): 958.

⁵Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps, “Shakespeare and Gender: An Introduction,” in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, p. 4.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 5.

paying attention to the historical conditions that shapes their lives.

As mentioned before, Shakespeare’s attitude to gender is debatable. So, reassessing Shakespeare’s theory of feminism often involves a careful consideration of his female characters and their relationship to male ones. To quote Novy again, she invites us to read Shakespeare as a “champion of women.” She argues that “for all the limitations on his feminism, he is one of the few widely honored culture heroes who can be claimed as a supporter of women at all.”⁷ The followers of such opinion take into consideration the issues of genre and gender alike. They turn to the strong-willed, intelligent and emotionally vital role that is taken by female characters such as Rosalind, Viola, Beatrice and Helena in the middle and late comedies. Even though this opinion is contradicted by Linda Bamber who has pointed out that Shakespeare’s female characters are not exclusive to the above ones, but rather his treatment of tragic heroines reveals his misogyny.⁸

Bamber’s view is supported by Valerie Traub who uses a psychoanalytic model of the earlier studies to show the anxiety of male about female power. In his essay “Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare’s Plays,” Traub states that “in recent years many feminist, psychoanalytic and New Historical critics have exposed the

existence and analysed the possible meanings of a masculine anxiety towards female power in Shakespeare's plays."⁹

Gradually, as the psychoanalytic impact on gender studies become apparent, it turns its concentration into the social construction of male and female, masculine and feminine, employing cultural factors to probe the patriarchy and cultural history of Shakespeare and gender.

Within the framework of psychoanalytic domain, there were important areas of dispute related to Shakespeare gender studies. This dispute is represented by essentialists and constructionists. While essentialists tend to see human identity or gender as something stable and wholly predetermined, constructionists see gender as socially formed. Thus, it is subject to change and differ over time within a certain culture.

⁷Marianne Novy, "Demythologizing Shakespeare," *Women's Studies* 9 (1981): 24.

⁸Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982)

⁹Valerie Traub, "Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare's Plays," in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, ed. Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), p. 120.

However, the tendency of critics "to see identity as socially constituted rather than essentially given [or natural]" led both feminists, Carol Neely and Lynda Boose "to accuse those critics of silencing or marginalizing women."¹⁰ This truth is shown clearly in Boose's dissatisfaction of materialists who make gender issues "end up getting displaced into some other issue-usually race or class-and women are silently eradicated from the text."¹¹ Similarly, Neely accuses them "of treating gender in a way that blocks, displaces, or defers it, or turns it into something else, or makes it cease to matter."¹²

This beleaguered attitude and fear of women comes from the old tradition which presents women as a main "source of the primal sin of lust, combining with concerns about the threat to the family posed by female insubordination."¹³ Those critics such as Kathleen McLuskie take

Shakespeare's *King Lear* an example to show her dissents against those who see the chaos can be ensued when power is changed.

Moreover, the "new reading" of Shakespeare gender outweighs the humanistic side of human beings. In doing so, the gap between genders is minimised. In such concern, Kiernan Rayan argues that "what starts to evolve is the understanding that every individual is at the same time a *human* being, whose faculties, needs, experiences and aspirations are actually shared, or potentially shareable, with the rest of the species."¹⁴

So, in Shakespeare's plays both female and male characters are given an effective role which is suitable to his/her nature. While in tragedies, the key role is taken by male characters, in comedies, the female characters take the initiative. What is the most important thing to see in Shakespeare's plays whether they are comedies or tragedies is that Shakespeare concentrates on the genre of the play to show the characteristics of masculine and feminine.

In tragedies, for example, the tragic play deals with one figure who gives his name for the title. This figure is mostly male who has one tragic flaw, leading to his downfall. Taken into

¹⁰Jonathan Dollimore, "Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism," *New Literary History*, v. 21, n. 3, *New Historicisms, New Histories, and Others* (Spring, 1990): 473.

¹¹Lynda E. Boose, "The Family in Shakespeare Studies; or – Studies in the Family of Shakespeareans; or – the Politics," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 40 (1987): 729.

¹²Jonathan Dollimore, "Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism," p. 474-475.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 474.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 479.

consideration the nature of tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*, we see all of them suffers from certain defect which naturally reflects their impairment. Hamlet is hesitant. Othello is jealous. King Lear is mentally sick. Moreover, all of them are misfit in the sense that they are

good and intelligent in one aspect but failure in another one. Othello, for example, is courageous in battlefield but failure as a lover. Accordingly, Shakespeare assigns tragedies for male character which requires tough personalities. However, the stereotypical Renaissance thinking of women as a weak creature (physically, emotionally, intellectually, morally), makes them not suitable for tragedies which requires cruelty and bloodshed. This is clear in the situation of Lady Macbeth when she decides to become an "active" partner in her husband's deadly mischief. Because of women's soft nature, she needs to pray "Come, you spirits ... unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe topful / Of direst cruelty,"

In comedies, the situation is completely different. We see that the females' characters are clever, independent and practical. They are even more clever than men whose existence are trouble makers. Also the comedies centres around themes of love and tenderness which are women's domain. They are shrouded with happy atmosphere which includes love of first sight, mistaken identity, sacrifice and a sense of love journey. If we take, for example, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, we see that she is clever, lovable and wise woman. As one of "strong females," she demonstrates more self-awareness than the men in the play. She controls the events of the play in a way making all the characters' action are determined by her.

As we know, Shakespeare wrote his plays to be acted on the stage, rather than to be read. He uses theatre to reflect the traditions and behaviour of people which was rife during the Elizabethan age. As such, I don't think that Shakespeare has aggressive or misogynistic attitude towards women. On the contrary, he wants to show the situation of women for the sake of empowering them. Similarly, he wants to criticize the voices which calls for marginalizing them.

Although Shakespeare reflects the English Renaissance stereotypes of women and men and their various roles in society, he also questions and challenges those representations. In doing so, the modern reader of Shakespeare will test his own view of gender and its relation to contemporary society.

Now it is time to investigate the dialectical relationship between male and females in Shakespeare's *Othello* to see how far Shakespeare was meant to reveal the divisions between people in Elizabethan age concerning women. Thus gender is associated closely with race and sexuality.

The gender relationship is clearly manifested by the following quotation from *The Taming of the Shrew*:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, Thy
head, thy sovereign...And craves no other tribute at thy hands,But love, fair looks, and true
obedience... I am ashamed that women are so simpleTo offer war where they should kneel
for peace,To seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,Where they are bound to serve, love, and
obey.¹⁵

The above lines reveal the role of women and their relation to men as it is reflected in the Elizabethan age. This kind of relationship is recalled by Desdemona at the beginning of *Othello* when she declares before her father and the Senate:

I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband:
And so much duty as my mother show'd To
you, preferring you before her father, So
much I challenge, that I may profess, Due to
the Moor my Lord. (1, iii, 185-9)¹⁶

Desdemona's speech reveals her personality which is fastidious and powerful in her decision of marriage. Although she is prescribed as obedient, she is "imagined as sexually desirable and powerful stabilizers of the family, controllers of husbands (and producers of children)."¹⁷

This special trait makes Elizabethan people being suspicious of women. As Marianne Novy states that

Popular thought often identified women with passion [while] men with reason, with an emphasis on the necessary subordination of the first to the second; since women, whether nurses or mothers, had primary responsibility for child-rearing, they were associated with everyone's first discovery of emotion. Many documents suggest that Elizabethan men were often suspicious of women.¹⁸

¹⁵Gayle Greene, "'This That You Call Love': Sexual and Social Tragedy in *Othello*," in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, ed. Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps, p. 47.

¹⁶G.B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The complete Works* (USA: Harcourt Brace Tovanovich, Inc., 1968).

¹⁷Thomas Neely, "Circumscriptions and Unhousedness: Othello in the Borderlands Caroi," in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, ed. Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps, p. 308.

¹⁸Marianne Novy, "Shakespeare and Emotional Distance in the Elizabethan Family," in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, ed. Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps, p. 70.

The Elizabethan suspicion of women is used as a background for the tragic end of Desdemona and an effective justification for Iago to achieve his evil actions. Right from the beginning, it is obvious that Iago hates Othello. He presents Othello, the Moor, as a man who is arrogant, proud, moody, and erratic in his judgment. But this picture which is given by Iago, is quite different when we see him on the stage (Scene II). He appears as the very personification of self-control, a man who is calm, confident and dignified and who has nothing to do with arrogance and egoism.

Shakespeare introduces the 'valiant Moor' (I, iii, 47) as a dignified and powerful person whose courage and military intelligence are needed to defend the state. In the trial, the place of justice, Othello captures our admiration from the first sight, especially when he defends himself before the Duke against Brabantio's accusation of Desdemona's usurpation. His nobility is reflected in the openness and honesty by which he approached his love to Desdemona. Iago decides to destroy him by spoiling all these good traits. His noble soul, to use Paul N. Siegel's words, is "caught in the toils of a diabolically cunning being, who tempts him to doubt the divine goodness of one in whom he has absolute faith."¹⁹

Iago expresses a number of different reasons for his hatred. The first is his resentment of Othello's choice of Cassio rather than himself as lieutenant, a rebuke especially cutting to him because Cassio is a 'great arithmetician' (I, i, 19) without experience in the field. Iago complains bitterly that Cassio's virtue cast a shadow over his own depraved life:

He hath a daily beauty in his life
makes me ugly (V,i, 19-20)

That

Later on he states that he hates the Moor for having cuckolded him:

I do suspect that lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inward
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him wife for wife.

(II,i, 304-308)

¹⁹Paul N. Siegel, ed., "The Damnation of Othello", PMLA. 68 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 1068.

The above lines reveal Iago's attitude towards justice. He clarifies his belief in the certitudes of the old revenge law whose punishment demands an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Iago suspects that the Moor has taken his place with his own wife and is having sexual proximity with her. This thought bites into his bowels like a poisonous substance, and nothing can or will satisfy his injured soul, apart from the act of taking away his wife, as the Moor has taken Iago's wife.

Iago further explains that he himself has a lust for Desdemona, but his lust is not only limited to physical desire. His love for her is partly to fulfil his desire for revenge:

I do love her too,
Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin,
But partly led to diet my revenge.

(II, i, 300-303)

Iago takes on his shoulders the task of injuring Desdemona's reputation by insinuating poison of jealousy in Othello's mind. 'Yet that I put the Moor/At least into a jealousy so strong.' (II, i, 300-301). He resolves to plant the seeds of jealousy as the best way to achieve his own ends. Iago, as C.J. Sisson puts it, "is the true key to the play and to the conflict between him and Othello which,

with its consequences, form the action”²⁰

Moreover, Iago is a Venetian, while Othello is a Moor, and Cassio a Florentine. They are both foreigners. His envy leads him to begin, with the help of Roderigo, a gentleman who loves Desdmona, on his first plot. Iago decides to take revenge on Othello and his supplanter, Cassio. Shakespeare makes him take the audience into his confidence at every stage of his plotting.

The conflict between Othello and Iago takes the form of a revenge-plot whereby looks for a means to injure Othello and in such a way as to involve his other enemy Cassio in grave injury. Revenge, as Bacon wrote, is “wild justice”²¹ and Iago could seek recourse to no other redress for his wrongs.

The motivating circumstances give Iago the soil he needed to plant the seeds of jealousy.

²⁰C. J. Sisson, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Justice* (London: Methuen & Co., 1965), p.41.

²¹A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 2nd edition, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), p.230.

Desdemona’s innocent and persistent appeal to Othello to forgive Cassio and keep him in his post arouses the Moor’s curiosity. Yet, Othello is not ready to lose his faith:

If she be false, Oh, then Heaven mocks itself!

I’ll not believe ’t. (III, iii, 278-279)

Unfortunately, Othello is betrayed by circumstances which are enough to make any man jealous. The ‘ocular proof’, Desdemona’s gift, which is found in Cassio’s house makes Othello feel wrongly hurt, betrayed, and ridiculed, and these bitter feelings are highly motivating:

Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!

Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne

To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,

For ’tis of spice tongues!

O blood, blood, blood! (III, iii, 446-459)

The foregoing lines reflect Othello's changing mood. The seeds of evil, which are planted by Iago, begin to give its fruits. Now the wild spirit of revenge arises from the vaulted cell of hell. His love for Desdemona, which is the crown and throne of his heart, is replaced by cruel hatred. He feels that his chest swells with its burdens for it is full of the stings of the poisonous snakes.

In *Othello*, jealousy is treated as a state in which man experiences the opposition of two conflicting kinds of belief; the belief in evidence and in the person one loves, and the opposition of the value of justice to the value of love. The tragedy of Othello derives from these oppositions since in the jealousy of Othello, the value of justice and love becomes openly contestant and reveal their essential incompatibility.

The temptation Scene testifies to Othello's development as a character. During the course of Act III, scene iii, Othello's temper begins to change gradually. At the beginning of that Scene his devotion to Desdemona is absolute:

Perdition catch my soul

But I do love thee. And when I love thee not,

Chaos is come again. (III, iii, 90-92)

Iago initiates his plot by arousing Othello's curiosity. He, indirectly, draws Othello's attention to the supposed relationship between Cassio and Desdemona. The process begins with his seemingly disinterested and innocuous question:

Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady,

Know of your love! (III, iii, 93-94)

By a series of such ambiguous questions, Iago fills Othello's mind with suspicions. He ostensibly with reluctance and motivated by 'love and duty to his master' (III, iii, 194), catches Othello's

weakness; 'look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio' (III, iii, 197). Iago is not simply a man of action, but "he is an artist. His action is a plot, the intricate plot of a drama, and in the conception and execution of it he expresses the tension and the joy of artistic creature."²²

Admittedly, Iago is a very complicated character. He is the focus of much critical debates. Iago, for example, is regarded as a combination of different schools. We may regard him as an equivalent of vice as suggested by Bernard Spivack who says that Iago requires no rational motives because his Elizabethan audience recognized him as the dramatic descendant of the vice of the morality plays. Also he is regarded as the typical Machiavellian who enjoys evil for its own sake as Wyndham Lewis has asserted that "Iago is a typical Elizabethan Machiavel,"²³ or we can think of him as a neo-Senecan villain-hero²⁴ who is trying to justify himself against a set of circumstances that have combined to oppress him. However, it is Coleridge who begins the pursuit of Iago's elusive motives with his famous reference to "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity." He states that Iago takes a disinterested delight in causing pain to others. Iago simply hates because he loves evil and finds "gaiety in destruction."²⁵

The fact that Othello is an outsider makes Iago point a slow, unmoving finger at Othello's secret insecurity, his Morrishness which severely damages his faith in Desdemona and also his faith in himself. Othello's race and colour are employed by Iago to put an end to Othello's life. E.A.J. Honigmann refers to this fact when he says that "Othello was secretly unsure of

²²Bernard Spivack, "Iago Revisited", *Shakespeare-The Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., Alfred Harbage (N.J: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964), p.86.

²³Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p. 66.

²⁴Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York: Collier Books, 1967), p.131.

²⁵S.T. Coleridge, *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, ed., Terence Hawkes (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), p.190.

himself as a lover because he too was conscious of the difference of race"²⁶

Being a black alien man, Othello is deceived by Iago's false picture of Venetian woman, of

whom Othello knows nothing. It must be understood that Othello has been only recently married to Desdemona and has not as yet developed the profound faith that prolonged marriage generates. All he feels is a sense of being in a dream, to be married to such an exquisitely beautiful woman. In addition, Othello is thrust with an artful preparation of a suggestion that Desdemona has deceived her father and thus proved how consummate an actress she is:

She did deceive her father, marrying you

And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,

She loved then most. (III, iii, 206-208)

The loss of Othello's faith makes him the prey of his passion. His acceptance of Iago's view wrenches him apart and looses the passions which gush forth from within him. Othello's rising and falling show the utmost potentialities for good and evil. In his greatness and weakness he proves the possibilities of human nature to commit sin. D.A. Traversi asserts that, "Othello is, indeed, the first of a series of Shakespearean heroes whose sufferings are explicitly related to their own failings, but who manage in spite of these failings to attain tragic dignity."²⁷

Othello responds to Iago's evil plans. He gives himself over to the devil, 'now art thou my lieutenant' (III, iv, 478). They kneel together side by side and Iago vows to be at his service in 'what bloody business ever' (III, iii, 469). Iago becomes Othello's guide, 'Do not rise yet' (III, iii, 463), and in making the devil his servant, Othello gives himself up into his power. Meanwhile, Iago reminds him of his dedication to revenge, 'Nay, you must forget that' (IV, i, 190), 'Nay, that's not your way' (IV, i, 197). Iago charges Othello with the sense of outraged honour so that he goes through with his assigned role to kill his wife.

Shakespeare prepares the audience for the catastrophe at the end of the play. The episodes of Act IV manifest and communicate the tension and the suffering that Othello tries to escape. The falling in a fit is a temporary way of not bearing this tension. His striking of

²⁶E.A.J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare-Seven Tragedies* (London: Western Printing Services Ltd., Bristol, 1976), p.93.

²⁷D. A. Traversi: *An Approach to Shakespeare* (London: Sands and Co., Ltd., 1956), p.129.

Desdemona in public recalls the attention to the intolerance of what he suffers. All these agitations lead Othello to a perfect action, that is to kill Desdemona, the sincere woman.

Othello who enters his wife's bed-chamber is not a murderer, but he merely wants to sacrifice his wife to save her from herself, not in hate but in honour and in love. There is no anger in Othello; all he feels, is immense sorrow. He suffers and sheds tears of heart-rending agony as he vacillates love and honour. Othello is the high priest of honour and justice. Once he is convinced that his wife has been unchaste, he has no option but to sacrifice her:

It is the cause, it is the cause, it is the cause,
My soul.

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!

It is the cause. (V, ii, 1-3)

The word "cause" in the above extract is used generally for offence or the nature of offence, which in this case is adultery. It is due to this that the "cause" is so hateful to Othello. He refuses to give it a name lest the chaste stars are polluted. It is obvious that his act is one of inevitable justice and not of revenge. Othello seems to say that "the cause" is so acute that the doom which justice calls for, and of which he is a totally unwilling instrument, is inescapable. To him it is the cause that matters and nothing else. He sees himself as heaven's justicer and he uses the old argument for retributive justice, that is, in its social usefulness, 'Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men' (V, ii, 6). Again, the old attitude against women as the main source of sin is recurrent here to show the endless conflict between genders.

The play ends with Othello, who is obsessed with justice, first seeks it through Desdemona, and when he realises that he 'threw a pearl a way:/ Richer than all his tribe' (V, ii, 347-348), he seeks it through himself. When he thrusts his sword into his breast in order, to expiate for his sins, he remembers what Iago has said, 'Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed' (IV, i, 219). Undeniably, Othello is stabbing the evil aspect within himself which Iago has aroused, 'Good, good. The justice of it pleases. Very good.' (IV, i, 221).

Othello, like Hamlet, kills Desdemona because of his view of honourability. Shakespeare's tragic

heroes are ruined by qualities which appear virtuous. It is not the jealousy and suspicions which bring about Othello's disaster, but his lack of knowledge of evil and the violence of his passion. In his spiritual blindness, Othello indulges in the grotesque parody of justice in which he condemns Desdemona for adultery and execute her upon her wedding sheets:

Iago: even the bed,

She hath contaminated.

(IV,i, 221)

Both Othello and Desdemona are deceived by their ability to see truth beneath its disguise, but the main cause of Othello's downfall is not that his jealousy but his spiritual blindness. He is perplexed and in his perplexity, he commits two mistakes; he judges Iago as good man in spite of his rough, blunt and unpleasing exterior, and he judges Desdemona to be a devil behind a mask of angelic beauty.