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In Shakespeare’s tragedy, Othello, there is something about Othello’s wife, Desdemona, that Iago wants to destroy and something that Othello wants to possess. The plot revolves around Desdemona and the possession of her, which leads to the destruction of her character. Othello’s want to possess his wife parallels a sense of domination in this Venetian period.

Shakespeare’s Othello is derived from Giovanbattista Giraldi Cinthio’s *De gli hecatommithi* [[1]](#footnote-2) (1565). The stories share a similar plot. However, a central difference in Cinthio’s story is Iago’s unreciprocated lust for Desdemona and Iago’s anger after she refuses him. This causes Iago to be the direct source of her destruction in the play. Shakespeare gives his characters a new route. Iago does not directly destroy Desdemona, he destroys Othello. Additionally, Iago does not lust for Desdemona.

In the first scene of Act 1, Iago disturbs Brabanzio, which is later known that he is the father of Desdemona, who has recently married the foreign black Moor, Othello. Othello’s refugee status, having moved from Africa to Venice, plays a large part in his misunderstanding the culture. A gullible man, he is easily manipulated, a characteristic which Iago notices and plays on throughout the play. The disruption of Brabanzio by Iago foreshadows his part as the antagonist. It represents his role as a devious character, warning audiences that he is not “Honest Iago…”[[2]](#footnote-3) as he is commonly identified. The first scene establishes Iago’s character, foreshadowing his position as an opponent to the other characters in the play.

This play defies traditional culture in the seventeenth century. The fair Desdemona is an outspoken, powerful woman who woos Othello, resulting in their controversial marriage between the older, black Moor (Othello), and the young white Venetian woman (Desdemona). While

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Desdemona and Othello see past the controversy of their union, the issue weighs heavily on other characters in the play, such as Brabanzio and the council which she is brought before to defend her love.

Desdemona does not portray the proper values of a Catholic Venetian adolescent, as she admits to Othello before their union. Desdemona’s voice and passion becomes a motive for her marriage to Othello, which provides a tragic ending. Desdemona’s status as an intelligent woman in Venetian society does not correspond with the views of the seventeenth century patriarchy, and leads to her demise. Desdemona’s qualities cause her to be punished. Therefore, the exact thing that causes Desdemona to be persued by Othello, her intelligence and distinctiveness, leads to her punishment. Ultimately, Iago kills Desdemona through the actions of Othello. Othello’s actions towards his wife in Act 5 are viewed as the ultimate revenge. Iago causes Othello to murder the one person he truly loves, simply because Iago tells him a lie about Desdemona being unfaithful.

Iago, the story’s antagonist, is a manipulative man who discovers weakness in every character and exploits it. He attempts to disguise his status in the play, “How am I then a villain…?”[[3]](#footnote-4) This is a manipulative ploy to make the audience sympathize with him. Such a scheme to trick the audience does not work, as his actions will function as evidence to prove the contrary.

Othello tells stories of great heroic adventures to Desdemona which unknowingly win her heart. A naïve man, he is easily manipulated by Iago, and is made jealous in the relationship with his wife. His deep necessity to possess her perpetuates him into a state of envy. In this situation, she is treated as an object as opposed to a person. Othello’s domination of Desdemona is taken to

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far. Iago holds this sense of control over Othello as he destroys her in the end of the play, without actually having to be in on the action.

Desdemona’s father treats her in the same material manner. Brabanzio becomes enraged at the news of his daughter’s marriage to the Moor, and brings Othello in front of the Duke’s council. Othello must justify that he has used no witchcraft or corruption to seduce Desdemona from her father’s possession. Before the council, Brabanzio claims, “She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted/ By spells and medicines bought of mountebacks.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Brabanzio’s accusations towards Othello suggest that the Moor has stolen his daughter and used foreign tactics to do so. The bottom line remains that Brabanzio thinks Desdemona has not left by her own choice. Such claims are rendered untrue, as Othello defends his marriage to the council. Othello offers evidence that Desdemona fell in love with him, “…for the dangers [he] had passed, / And [he] loved her that she did pity them.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Othello admits, “This only is the witchcraft I have used.”[[6]](#footnote-7) Therefore, Othello states that he did not seduce her or steal her away by force, but that she pitied his experiences and adventures. The council does not believe Othello, and they send to fetch Desdemona.

Upon her arrival, Desdemona tells the attendants, “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind.”[[7]](#footnote-8) She begs the council, “Let me go with him.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Desdemona claims that she sees past the color of Othello’s skin and that she has fallen in love with his personality. This mirrors Othello’s love for her and provides the audience with a reason why Othello wants to possess the young lady. He has not fallen in love with her because of her skin or because of her age. Instead, he falls in love

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with her intellect. She is an intelligent young woman, impressed by his experiences of war. He marries Desdemona because she is capable of making her own decisions, and conversing with Othello in an academic manner, which is uncommon of many women in this period. Generally, women in this time period are primarily concerned with being loyal to their husbands and suppressing their opinions to matters that are best dealt with by men. Desdemona is a rational character and enjoys the stories of her husband, and for this reason, Othello’s response to the possession of Desdemona is the obvious choice of the period, to marry her. His marriage to Desdemona ensures that she will belong to him like an object, or most literally, the object of his desire. Othello’s dominance over the intelligence which Desdemona displays causes her punishment by Iago, a member of the patriarchy. Desdemona’s unique position, being able to vocalize her opinions unlike other characters[[9]](#footnote-10), does not fit the traditional role in society which was expected of women in the seventeenth century.

Before the council, Desdemona explains that she owes her father greatly for the education and care he has given her, but she loves Othello. She is aware of the situation she has put herself in and does not deny the controversy of the choice she has made. Rather she embraces it and tries to explain to her bewildered father that she is simply following convention. This is the only aspect where Desdemona is displayed as a traditional woman in society. Desdemona chooses to follow the cultural position of women of this time period by being loyal to her husband. Her choice of husband, while controversial, is where Desdemona demonstrates her qualities of uniqueness and intellect. Brabanzio does not understand his daughter’s choice. He tells

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Desdemona, “I had rather to adopt a child than get it.”[[10]](#footnote-11) Brabanzio’s claim reflects his confusion of Desdemona’s marriage and his preference to replace her, instead of trying to understand her reasoning.

Contrasting Othello’s desire to control his wife, Iago wants to destroy the loyal Desdemona. His plan for destruction revolves around the complicated plot. After Iago is overlooked by Othello for a promotion, he suspects that his boss, Othello and his wife, Emilia are having an affair. Iago’s claims suggest that Othello has taken his place in bed with Emilia. However, Iago admits that he has no actual proof to support his suspicion. Iago states” And if it thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets/ he has done my office. I know not if’t be true, / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind.”[[11]](#footnote-12) Furthermore, Iago mentions, “The Moor is of a free and open nature/ That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.”[[12]](#footnote-13) Iago detects Othello’s gullibility, believing Iago to be honest[[13]](#footnote-14). Iago questions his position as a villain in the play, but for his devious quality to take advantage of flaws in the characters, paired with his actions of revenge on Othello, his classification as an antagonist is justified. Iago’s position is significant in the play as he delivers the final lie which unleashes the jealousy in Othello. The release of Othello’s aroused suspicion causes the punishment of his wife.

In Act 2, Iago admits that he “… love[s] her too, / Not out of absolute lust – though peradventure / [he] stand[s] accountant for as great a sin [as he will claim Cassio commits]”[[14]](#footnote-15) Therefore, Iago admits his reason for targeting Desdemona is to nourish his need for revenge.

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Iago admits that his suspicion of Othello and Emilia’s affair “Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards.”[[15]](#footnote-16) Iago’s suspicions devour him. He ponders the thought of Othello and Emila in bed together, and reveals that he cannot be satisfied “Till [he] is evened with [Othello], wife for wife.”[[16]](#footnote-17) Through Iago’s conversations aside from the other characters, where he appears to speak with the audience, a great deal of information is revealed about his love for Desdemona. However, because of Iago’s cruel nature, it is crucial that this is not a lust-based love. Furthermore, it is questionable if Iago is capable of actual love since he kills his wife in the end of the play because Emilia threatens to unravel his plans in her attempt to expose the truth.

Iago’s plot to make Desdemona appear to be having an affair with Cassio exists as the core of this tragedy. Iago implies that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio in Act III, scene iii, after Cassio is seen sneaking off from her presence. Iago further presents the affair to Othello in Act IV when the two men are talking in private. Othello, taking Iago by the throat, demands, “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore. / Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof.”[[17]](#footnote-18) However, Iago, uses his abilities to manipulate his opponent, and convince Othello Desdemona is having an affair by sparking Othello’s jealousy. Iago’s stories of Desdemona in bed with Cassio play on Othello’s dormant rage, inviting his temper to explode. Once Iago has convinced Othello, without proving the legitimacy of the affair, Othello goes to his wife, and without actually confronting her, he murders his trusting wife in the same sheets which were on the bed the night they were married.

Therefore, Othello both possess and destroys his true love. His possession of her is a representation of the patriarchal society and the suppression of free will. Othello believes the

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worst of his wife, when he could simply confront her. Othello manages to eliminate Desdemona’s ability to exercise free will, punishing her for opposing the traditional role of the Venetian women in the 1600s. While no proof is provided to support Iago’s claims about his wife and the Moor, Desdemona accepts that she is murdered and does not blame her husband. Emilia speaks to Desdemona in her final minutes, after being struck by Othello, Emilia asks her who is responsible for trying to kill her, to which Desdemona responds, “Nobody, I myself. Farewell.”[[18]](#footnote-19) Desdemona does not accuse Othello, even though he is responsible, she is loyal to her husband up until her death. Desdemona’s refusal to accuse her husband and her acceptance of her death is reflective of women’s roles in society as loyal, voiceless citizens. Her refusal to clarify the situation by denying being unfaithful reflects the notion that many Venetian women are having affairs, because the misunderstanding is not exposed. Therefore, Desdemona metaphorically dies for the sins of women in the 1600s.

Desdemona is a strong character, with a deep sense of loyalty to her husband and academic qualities which, unlike most other women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, she does not disguise. Her outward opinions and courage to speak out, in such instances as her presentation before the council, are a reflection of Othello’s desire to possess her. He chooses to marry her based on her strong intellectual qualities, which results in her destruction. Desdemona’s place as Othello’s wife, and the enemies which Othello has made, leads to her death at the end of the tragedy. Because Iago believes that his wife is having an affair with his superior, Othello, he will stop at nothing to avenge this betrayal, wife for wife, even though he has no concrete proof to legitimize this matter. Iago takes his revenge through Othello by destroying the one thing in life Othello truly loves. Othello dominates Desdemona for her

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vivacious intellect and unique qualities as a strong female in the seventeenth century, something which is uncommon of the patriarchal society. Iago goes through Desdemona to revenge Othello for an affair with Emilia, but no evidence exists to prove the legitimacy of Iago’s claims. Iago ultimately chooses the single object which is dearest to Othello, his wife, and manipulates the characters until they are even, wife for wife. Emilia and Desdemona are both destroyed in the end. Desdemona suffers the ultimate sacrifice because she fails to adhere to the stereotype which is set out for her by seventeenth century society.

References

Greenblatt, Stephen, ed. The Norton Shakespeare. Vol. 2. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc, 2008. 2 vols. 385-457.

1. Translated in English, the title means “Hundred Tales.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. (II,iii,160) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. (II, iii, 322) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. (I, iii, 60-61); mountebacks: quacks [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. (I,iii,166-167) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. (I,iii,168) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. (I,iii,251) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. (I,iii,258) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ie: Emilia, who is killed by her husband, a member of the partirachy who kills her for getting in his way. The fact that she dies while trying to tell the truth is significant because it shows the traditional virtuous female character versus the society which has no time for those who speak out against it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. (I,iii,190) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. (I,iii,369-371) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. (I,iii,381-382) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. As is hinted at in line 383-384 of Act 1, scene 3 : “And will as tenderly be led by th’ nose/ As asses are.” This hints that Iago plans to make an ass out of Othello by using his trusting qualities. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. (II,i,278-280) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. (II,i,284) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. (II,i,286) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. (III,iii,364-365) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. (V,ii,132) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)