“You Shall Not Write My Praise”: Iago’s Emotional Abuse of Emilia in *Othello*

*The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* has fascinated both playgoers and readers of the play since it was first written and performed in 1604. However, Othello is not the only tragic character in a play based on betrayal and loss. While most of the criticism focuses on Othello, Desdemona, and Iago, there is a growing discussion about Emilia, Iago’s wife. Due to her actions in stealing Desdemona’s handkerchief, there is a deep divide over whether or not she should be considered a sympathetic character. In her article, “‘I Know Nothing’: Emilia’s Rhetoric of Self-Resistance in *Othello*,” Eileen Abrahams points out, “There remains the question of how much, if any, moral responsibility is to be attributed to Emilia for her complicity in Iago’s plot” (179). By closely examining the way Emilia is portrayed by others and herself, it can be seen that Emilia is not a co-conspirator with Iago but instead an emotionally manipulated woman who becomes caught up in the web of lies of her villainous husband.

Literary scholars have taken different stances on Emilia’s role in the play and what she represents. Geoffrey Hutchings explains in “Emilia: A Case History in Womens’ Lib*” that, “Emilia is therefore a vital dramatic component in the working out of one of the major themes of the play, the destructive power of sexual alienation” (76). He posits that Emilia represents what happens when an individual is hurt and alienated sexually. This can be seen in the way Iago doubts her virtue and publically belittles her. It is evident she is alienated sexually, but this plays
into the broader spectrum of her being manipulated by her husband. Iago alienates her sexually in order to manipulate her even more emotionally.

Conversely, other critics argue Emilia was happy in her marriage and completely unaware of her husband’s villainy. In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A.C. Bradley argues, “There is no sign either that Emilia’s marriage was downright unhappy, or that she suspected the true nature of her husband” (176). Bradley uses this to explain Emilia’s actions concerning Desdemona and Othello as complete unawareness. However, this does not make sense in context with the rest of the play. Emilia deserves more credit than being a simple woman who has no idea about the character of her husband. Further, there is ample evidence Iago and Emilia’s marriage was unhappy, both through Iago’s condescending remarks about his wife, and Emilia’s own bitter diatribe about the jealousy of husbands.

Instead of being happy in her marriage, Emilia is abused by her husband, Iago. While Hutchings and Bradley make valid points, literary critic Sarah Deats argues, “Emilia breaks the cycle of spousal abuse and speaks for dignity and equality between husbands and wives” (249). This argument fits much better with the actual words and actions of Emilia throughout the play. Emilia ultimately tells the truth in a play that is filled with lies and abuse. She may be caught up in making her husband happy, but in the end, she dies to tell the truth. Further, what we learn about her through Othello, Desdemona, Iago, and even herself, shows she is not a villain or even a willing co-conspirator, but a woman desperate to make an evil and abusive husband happy.

As wide ranging as the literary criticism is over the character of Emilia, her character can be found trustworthy through how the protagonist, Othello, and his wife, Desdemona, speak about her. Othello says to Iago, “My Desdemona must I leave to thee. / I prithee let thy wife attend on her” (1.3.295-96). Othello has just married Desdemona at this point and must leave her
to go lead the army against the Turks. Othello would not just leave his new bride with just anyone. He would want her to be safe and happy with someone he trusted. The very fact he entrusts Desdemona into the care of Emilia implies exactly how much he esteems her. Desdemona is his world, and he truly believes Emilia will take care of his precious bride. In turn, Desdemona also shows her trust of Emilia. Later in the play, Desdemona asks Emilia, “Where should I lose the handkerchief, Emilia?” (3.4.23). Desdemona has no idea Emilia is the one who has taken the handkerchief; she never even thinks to question her about it. Instead, in innocent simplicity, she asks her where in the world she could have possibly mislaid it. In this instance, Desdemona’s trust in Emilia is misplaced, but it does illustrate that our two main sympathetic characters, Desdemona and Othello, do completely trust and esteem Emilia.

While Othello and Desdemona paint a very trustworthy view of Emilia, her husband Iago vocally expresses his disdain of her. Iago says to Cassio, “Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough” (2.1.100-102). This can be taken two ways: Emilia is a vocal shrew, or it could imply sexual looseness. Iago goes on further after Desdemona comments this cannot be true since Emilia is not actually speaking, saying, “In faith, too much. / I find it still when I have leave to sleep. / Marry, before your ladyship, I grant, / she puts her tongue a little in her heart and chides with thinking” (2.1.103-107). Iago basically says Emilia is a shrew and a nag even when she is not speaking, that she “chides with thinking.” In Iago’s eyes, Emilia is not a loving, obedient wife. Therefore, it does not make sense that Iago would use Emilia as a co-conspirator with him because then he would have to actually interact with his wife. He does not imply she would willingly obey him, instead she must be coerced.
Iago clearly argues Emilia is a shrew; however, there is no evidence she actually says or does any of the things Iago accuses her of. In the article, “The Turn of the Shrew: Gendering the Power of Loquacity in Othello,” Swati Ganguly explains, “Perhaps the conspicuous disjunction between Iago's insistence on Emilia's role as a shrew and her reticence drives home the double-bind of the calumniated wife; for Emilia to speak at this juncture would merely confirm Iago's slander – that she is indeed the scold – yet by not protesting she ends up colluding in Iago's myths about herself” (8). As Ganguly points out, Emilia is backed into a corner. If she responds to Iago to defend herself, she can be characterized as a shrew and a nag. If she is obedient and subservient to her husband, she has to be quiet and deferent to him, and his view stands without opposition. Even when she is publically mocked and scorned, she does not defend herself against her husband. All she says is, “You have little cause to say so” (2.1.108). She says he has no cause for his accusations. She does not go any further than that, and she stays quiet as he continues to verbally abuse her in front of the rest of the characters. This is what happens when a woman is emotionally manipulated by someone close to her; she loses the will to stand up for herself.

Because Emilia does not defend herself against Iago’s derogatory claims, it indicates she is being abused by him, either emotionally or physically. Roxanne Schwab of Loyola University Chicago says, “Given that Iago exhibits so many of the traits common to an abusive partner, it is not surprising that his first words to Emilia in the play are aimed at publicly humiliating, and thus controlling, her.” Schwab argues that Iago fits all the signs of an abusive spouse, and the evidence in the text is there. As she indicates, the fact he humiliates her publically and she does not respond to him, furthers the idea she is being manipulated emotionally.
Iago continues the verbal assaulting of Emilia in front of everyone. Iago scornfully remarks, “Come on, come on! You are pictures out of door, / Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens, / Saints in your injuries, devils being offended, / Players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds” (2.1.109-112). Iago is once again implying that Emilia is not a good woman, and further, she cheats. “Huswifery” and “huswives” are derogatory and sexually charged terms for women, and Iago is tarnishing his wife’s virtue. It makes no sense for a loving and happy marriage, as Bradley argued Iago and Emilia’s marriage was, to have one spouse verbally mocking and abusing the other spouse. This is an obvious sign of abuse and it tells us more about Iago’s actions than Emilia. Emilia might not even be aware of how wrongly Iago actually treats her. Schwab explains further, “Although she may not be fully cognizant of it, she has obviously been abused and manipulated by her villainous husband long before the evil machinations upon which the plot turns are set into motion.” Because Iago mocks Emilia with such little care, it implies he has done it many times before. He does not hesitate and continues on without shame. Further, Iago wants everyone to think the worst of Emilia, and he would not do this if they were co-conspirators because he would want Emilia to have the trust of everyone around her in order to help in his plot.

While Iago publically humiliates Emilia, he does eventually decide to use her to help move along his plot against Othello. Iago plots, “My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress – / I’ll set her on” (2.2.370-71). Despite the verbal abuse he gives Emilia, Iago realizes she could be extremely helpful to him. First, he decides to manipulate her into pleading Cassio’s case to Desdemona, who will then plead Cassio’s case to Othello. Further, he plans on using Emilia to obtain the handkerchief Othello gave to Desdemona, the key that proves their love. In order to obtain this, he needs someone who will not question him. Emilia has already proven she will stay
silent even when he hurts her; therefore, she is the perfect candidate, the one person completely under his thumb. Iago’s decision to use Emilia leads to the critical turning point of the play, the stealing of the handkerchief, which leads to Othello’s mistrust and eventual murder of Desdemona.

While Othello, Desdemona, and Iago all speak about Emilia, her own lines are the most revealing about her character, and her reaction to Iago’s request is quite telling. Emilia says to herself:

I am glad I have found this napkin;
This was her first remembrance from the Moor.
My wayward husband hath a hundred times
Wooed me to steal it; but she so loves the token…
That she reserves it evermore about her
To kiss and talk to. I’ll have the work ta’en out
And give’t Iago. What he will do with it
Heaven knows, not I; I nothing but please his fantasy. (3.3.290-99)

Emilia’s first thought is to help her husband. It is revealed here that he has entreated her before to steal this handkerchief for him. This shows she is loyal to her husband and wants to make him happy. Interestingly, she calls her husband wayward, which implies she has at least some knowledge of him not being truly honest and a good person. However, regardless of the knowledge that he might not have good intentions, she decides to do what he has asked. It is possible she does not want to deal with his wrath if she fails, or it could be that she wants to please him. Emilia specifically says “I nothing but please his fantasy” (3.3.299). This indicates she wants to make him happy. Iago has manipulated her so much that even though he treats her
horribly, she still wants to please him. Love can be blinding, and Emilia has been so emotionally
manipulated by Iago that she can longer see clearly what he is doing to her.

Earlier in the play, Emilia tells Iago she believes she cannot ever make him happy. “You
shall not write my praise,” says Emilia to Iago (2.1.116). Iago replies with, “No, let me not”
(2.1.117). The relationship between Iago and Emilia is quite sad and disheartening. Emilia thinks
she cannot do anything to please him, and Iago concurs with her. If Emilia is trying to please
Iago, then this explains her willingness to go to Desdemona to plead Cassio’s case, as well as her
decision to steal the handkerchief for Iago. When you are constantly told by your husband he
will never praise you for anything you do, and the opportunity presents itself to actually fulfill
one of his requests, a wife would quickly do anything to fulfill that request.

However, while Emilia wants to please Iago, she also is concerned about her mistress,
Desdemona. Emilia says to Iago, “If it be not for some purpose of import, / Give’t me again.
Poor lady, she’ll run mad / When she shall lack it” (3.3.316-18). Emilia brings Desdemona’s
handkerchief to Iago, but she does not seem to have any intention of letting him keep it. She
immediately asks for it back unless it is very important he have it because she is worried about
Desdemona missing it. It could be she is just concerned she will get in trouble when Desdemona
misses it, but she specifically calls her “poor lady,” which implies she cares for her and does not
want her to be upset. Emilia may be easily swayed by Iago, and she lets him use her, but she is
still aware and caring of the others around her. This caring for Desdemona illustrates Emilia does
not have any malicious intent for Desdemona, and she is probably not an aware co-conspirator
with her husband.

There is further evidence that Emilia not only truly cares for Desdemona, but she wants
to counsel her as a friend. As Emilia attends Desdemona, they have an interesting conversation
about husbands and marital faithfulness. She counsels Desdemona about jealousy, saying, “But jealous souls will not be answered so; / They are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they’re jealous. It is a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself” (3.4.158-61). These are Emilia’s epic words of wisdom in this play. She realizes jealousy is usually without cause, and it becomes a monster. She shares this to warn Desdemona, and it indicates she cares about her well-being. The overall feeling of this scene is one of an older woman trying to counsel a younger lady whom she cares about deeply. These words are also ironic because Emilia becomes just as much a victim of jealousy as Desdemona does through the actions of Iago.

Emilia also reveals to Desdemona she would do anything in the world to make her husband happy. Emilia declares, “I would not do such a thing...for all the whole world - Ud’s pity! who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for’t” (4.3.72-77). Emilia admits she would cheat if it meant she could help her husband advance his position. This throws new light on Iago’s insinuations about her infidelity. However, she does say the only reason she would do so is to make her husband happy. Thus, it is further established that Emilia is a woman who would do anything to please her husband. She even says she would suffer hell-fire if it meant helping him, and this is not a vow to be taken lightly. While this could imply she was a willingly conspirator with Iago, based on the rest of his comments to her, and her insistence she cannot actually please him, it seems to indicate more strongly that Iago has just emotionally manipulated her enough to where she is at the point she will do anything for him.

Since Emilia will do anything for Iago, this necessitates her one questionable action in the play: she lies to Desdemona about the whereabouts of her handkerchief. Emilia responds to Desdemona about the lost handkerchief, saying, “I know not, madam” (3.4.24). Emilia tells an
outright lie to Desdemona because she does actually know where the handkerchief is. She is the one that took it at the insistence of Iago. It seems Emilia is trying to protect herself and Iago, even if she does not know why. She cannot acknowledge the fact that she took it because she knows it is wrong. Further, Abrahams explains, “Indeed, it is freedom, not necessity, which initiates Emilia’s lies, both to herself and to Desdemona. She lies to Desdemona because she has chosen to live in denial of a truth which she cannot acknowledge: that she had the choice to act otherwise, and now, this denial has become the truth in which she lives” (179). Emilia has chosen to deny the truth because she cannot face that Iago has set her on a path that requires her to lie and steal. Emilia has to create this world of denial because otherwise she would have to admit she is being manipulated and abused by her husband. And no woman wants to face that reality.

Emilia is blind to Iago’s villainy until the very end. After Othello kills Desdemona, she confronts him in anguish over her mistress’s murder, and Othello tells her it was Iago who told him about Desdemona’s supposed infidelity. Her response is, “My husband?” (5.2.141). She repeats this three times (5.2.141, 148, 151). She cannot comprehend that he is the one that could have given Othello information she knows to be false, and she knows Iago knows it is untrue as well. She repeats her question in stunned belief three times. This is finally the turning point for her. She realizes what Iago has done and how her actions have contributed to it. She can no longer blind herself to what Iago is and what he has done to Desdemona or to herself.

Once Emilia realizes the truth, she cannot stay silent any longer and reveals Iago’s villainy to Othello. Iago tries to stop her and orders her to go home. Iago stabs her when she refuses. As she dies, she proclaims to Othello, “Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor: so come my soul to bliss as I speak true. So speaking as I think, alas, I die” (5.2.250-52).
Emilia’s final words show at least when she is dying, she does the right thing and dies a hero. She clears Desdemona’s name even though it costs her life. It takes the death of her beloved friend and her own mortal injury at the hands of her husband for her to break free, but she does it. As Solomon Iyasere of California State University Bakersfield, says, “When Iago orders Emilia to go home (5.2.194), he is addressing the ‘former’ Emilia, a wife who was psychologically a slave to him, who would do anything to please him…But at this point, the ‘new’ Emilia has abandoned conventional wifely behavior and has broken out of her own self-imposed restraints” (71). She is no longer constrained by her love for him, and she will no longer let him manipulate her. Emilia demonstrates the strongest courage anyone can show: proclaiming truth when it means sacrificing her own life. However, if she had had this courage sooner, she might have saved herself and Desdemona from ever reaching this fate.

Instead of being the willing co-conspirator of Iago, Emilia is just an emotionally manipulated woman who becomes caught up in the web of lies of her villainous husband. The character of Emilia shows what happens to a woman who desperately tries to make an abusive husband happy. No individual should be treated the way Iago treats Emilia, and true love should never require you to go against what you believe to be right and true. Instead of following in the footsteps of Emilia, who did her utmost to please her evil husband, it is important to stand for what is right and true, no matter how much you love someone. Truth and respect are monumentally important, and the character of Emilia illustrates what happens to someone when they do not receive this truth and respect. Emilia is a tragic character, but ultimately, she is a hero because she is the only one who breaks free from the lies and abuse. Emilia suffers death for her choice to break free from her husband, but her revelation and subsequent death bring the freedom of the truth to the rest of the characters caught up in Iago’s web of lies.
Works Cited


