

# The Fun of the Hunt in Othello

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In Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, the men hunt the women, as a human hunts animals in the wild. The man exerts dominance and expects the woman to accept her submissive role in relation to his dominance. The central couples involved in showing this type of male-female relationship are Othello and Desdemona, Iago and Emilia, and Cassio and Bianca. Shakespeare illustrates the hunt in the sexual encounters, the marriages/ relationships, and the murders exhibited by these characters during the play. Simultaneously, the way the men hunt the women in the play is mirrored by the way Iago hunts all of the characters. The hunting which is displayed throughout *Othello* is reinforced by the plethora of animal images Shakespeare uses in the language of the play.

Emilia clearly sees, and articulates, the nature of the hunter-hunted male-female relationship. She shows this understanding when she says "what is it that [men] do when they change us for others? Is it sport? I think it is" (IV,iii,107). Emilia is examining the inclination of men to sleep around. She explains it by saying that men do not see women as humans, but rather as animals who are fun to chase, but once conquered, lose some of their intrigue and the men want to move onto other women. Iago shows that he has this opinion of women when he says that Desdemona and Emilia are "wildcats" in their "kitchens" who "rise to play and go to bed to work" (II,i,123,129). Iago is saying that his vision of women is that when they are not in bed they are just playing. This goes along with the definition that The American Heritage Dictionary gives of "sport" -- that it is a type of "game" with a certain set of rules (a hunt, for example). Similarly, the use of the word "wildcats" to describe them again calls up the sport (of hunting) image. It is a game for men to get the women from the kitchens into bed. Then, when the women are in bed they simply fulfill their duties to their husbands to sleep with them. Once they are in bed (having sex), the game has ended. Othello also makes reference to women as inhuman prizes when he calls Desdemona "honey" (II,i,225), although this reference is unintentional on his part. By calling her "honey" he is utilizing a common term of endearment, calling a woman "honey" is like calling her 'sweet' because honey is sweet. However, the term also has a flip side of meaning to it which affirms the way men hunt women in order to get them into relationships or into bed. This side is that humans must break through the protecting barrier of bees to achieve honey. To achieve his "honey" (Desdemona) Othello must get her to fall in love with him, in other words, break through her defenses and get into her heart. The reader is not privy to that portion of Othello and Desdemona's relationship in the play, that part takes place before the action of the play begins, but it can be inferred. The "sport" that Emilia talks about is the hunt of women.

Seduction, which is the starting point of a male-female relationship, is portrayed as having certain rules, as does a hunt (a type of a game/sport), in *Othello*. The rules are often established societally. Roderigo attempts to abide by the societal rules by trying to get Desdemona from her father, Barbantio. He sees her father as having the power to tell her, Desdemona, who to marry because that was the custom of the society. A woman's father was "the lord of [her] duty" until he gives over that 'lordship' to his daughter's husband (I,iii,212). This means that it was her duty to do whatever she told him to do (including to marry a particular person). Roderigo appeals to the power of Barbantio rather than going directly to

Desdemona which is what Othello does. But, Othello undermines the lordship of Barbantio by doing that. Iago reveals this when he tells Barbantio that "[his] daughter [Desdemona] and the moor are making the beast with two backs" (I,i,130). The fact that Desdemona is having sex with someone before getting her father's permission goes against the rules of the 'seduction-hunt' to which Roderigo is adhering. Barbantio does finally give this power over to Othello saying "I have done" (I,iii,219). Othello and Desdemona's relationship started out not following the rules, but eventually fell back under their cover. While Cassio's relationship with his mistress Bianca is one that does not follow these type of mainstream societal rules, it has rules nonetheless. Cassio successfully seduces Bianca by means of sexual contact. He has sex with her and attaches a minimal importance to that and she in turn clings onto that 'importance'. She shows her dependence on him during the encounter they have. "What, keep a week away? Seven days and nights, Eightscore eight hours, and lovers' absent hours" complains Bianca to Cassio, describing how she missed him (III,iv,196-7). She is only his mistress and yet by performing in bed he gave her the impression that he was in a sort of relationship with her whereby he was implicitly required to visit her on a regular basis.

The scene in which Othello murders Desdemona, he acts entirely as a predatory animal, lacking human characteristics. Othello kills her using no manmade instrument. He simply smothers her. This is the same up-close, intimate, primitive way that an animal is required to kill. Ironically, Othello justifies the action as a man would. His justification relies on the 'higher duties' he has to other men, saying "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V,ii,7). He is attempting to humanize himself while dehumanizing her through tricking himself into thinking he is a rational being. This murder scene also reveals itself to be ironic when looked at with regard to the passage in which it is said that Desdemona will "tame" Othello (III,iii,25). During the murder scene it is her existence which brings out the most primal of his actions (the urge, and ability, to kill). She does not "tame" his animalistic side but rather aggravates it. Moments before Othello commits suicide, directly after he kills Desdemona (his wife), Othello says he is a "circumcised dog" (V,ii,416). At this moment he at last sees plainly, the deception has cleared away from his mind, and he understands himself to be an animal, not a human, as he had thought before. The fact that he is not human reveals to him that he did not hunt (as a controlled sport) Desdemona, as he thought he had. But that instead he was only participating in a very base, animalistic action lacking in rules, control or humanity.

Through evaluating Othello in reference to hunting, it becomes apparent that as the men in the play are hunting the women, Iago is hunting the men (and by consequence, also the women). He is the key designer of the play, and essentially wrote the play by planning out its action. He says he will "ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (II,i,183).

Similarly, Iago says he intends to lead Othello "by the nose, like an ass" (I,iii,445), and then, later, in the second act, Iago again says he will make Othello an "ass" (II,ii,331). These phrases show that Iago sees himself as the human hunter. He verbally changes people who are thought of as humans into animals over whom he has control and dominance. Iago will control how they perceive the world and eventually trap them by means of these fabricated perceptions.

When Iago kills his wife, Emilia, he follows through with the above explored male-hunts-female relationship. He kills her at the point that she is no longer running from him, at the point that she is no longer obeying the turns he says he makes unquestioningly. But, although she thinks that she is defying him by stopping her

running, in reality he has cornered her, he has hunted her down. Emilia says "tis proper I obey him [Iago], but not now" (V,ii,233). She believes that she is going against him, standing up to him, but in truth Iago wants her to tell Othello that Desdemona was not actually committing adultery because he wants Othello to commit suicide. Iago then kills her, which is the completion of a hunt, and this action is understood because she was perceived to be disobeying her "lord". Unlike Othello, Iago maintains his human status in murdering because he remains entirely in control of the events occurring at the point that he murders. This human control is shown physically in that Iago uses his manmade sword to kill Emilia, he does not revert to the animalistic smothering Othello uses to kill Desdemona.

The hunter/hunted relationships which are explored throughout Othello draw a parallel between the supposedly refined court life, and the life in the wild