Contemporary views

1 A man in his natural perfection is fierce, strong in opinion, covetous of glory, desirous of knowledge, appetiting by generation to bring forth his semblable. The good nature of a woman is to be mild, timorous, tractable, benign, of sure remembrance and shamefast. Divers other qualities of each of them might be found out, but these be most apparent and for this time sufficient.
Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor*, 1531

2 Weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish: and experience hath declared them to be unconstant, variable, cruel and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment.
John Knox, *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, 1558

3 [banishing] the great number of niggers and blackamoors which are crept into this realm ... who are fostered and relieved here to the great annoyance of her own liege people, that want [lack] the relief which those people consume.
Queen Elizabeth I's proclamation of 1601

4 But since I have taken occasion to mention some notable particulars of their women, I will insist further upon that matter, and make relation of the Courtezans also, as being a thing incident and very proper to this discourse, especially because the name of a Courtezan of Venice is famoused over all Christendome [...] The woman that professeth this trade is called in the Italian tongue *Cortezana*, which word is derived from the Italian word *cortesia* that signifieth courtesie. Because these women are said to receive courtesies of their favourites [...] As for the number of these Venetian Cortezans it is very great. For it is thought there are of them in the whole City and other adjacent places, as Murano, Malomocco, etc. at the very least twenty thousand, whereof many are esteemed so loose, that they are said to open their quivers to every arrow. A most ungodly thing without doubt that there should be a toleration of such licentious wantons in so glorious, so potent, so renowned a city. For me thinks that the Venetians should be daylie afraid least their winking at such uncleanesse should be an occasion to draw down upon them God's curses and vengeance from heaven, and to consume their city with fire and brimstone, as in times past he did Sodome and Gomorrha. But they not fearing any such thing doe grant large dispensation and indulgence unto them, and that for these two causes [...] For they thinke that the chastity of their wives should be assaulted, and so consequently they should be capricornified [cuckolded and so made to wear the (metaphorical) horns of the foolish husband] (which of all the indignities in the world the Venetian cannot patiently endure) were it not for these places of evacuation. But I marvaile how that should be true these Cortezans were utterly rooted out of the City. For the Gentlemen do even coope up their wives always within the walles of their houses for feare of these inconveniences, as much as if there were no Cortezans at all in the City. So that you shall very seldome see a Venetian Gentleman's wife but either at the solemnization of a great marriage, or at the Christening of a Jew, or late in the evening rowing in a Gondola.
Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* (1611)

5 [Italian women were] very lewd and wicked, for even in the ancient city of Rome, there are many thousands of lewd living women that pay monthly unto the Pope for the sinful use of their wicked bodies. .
***A true relation of the travels and most miserable captivity of William Davies, barber-surgeon of London* (1614)**

6 Wives are slippery, often unfaithful to their husbands but to old men most treacherous [...]

A fourth eminent cause of jealousy may be this, when that he is deformed, as Pindar says of Vulcan, without natural graces [...] will marry some fair piece [...] Can she be fair and honest too?
Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1616)

7 Southern men are more hot, lascivious and jealous, than such as live in the North: they can hardly contain themselves in those hotter climes, but are the most subject to prodigious lusts. Leo Afer telleth incredible things almost of the lust and jealousy of his Countrymen of Africa, and especially such as live about Carthage, and so doth every Geographer of them in Asia, Turkey, Spain, Italy. Germany hath not so many drunkards, England Tobacconists, France Dancers, Holland Mariners, as Italy alone hath jealous husbands.
Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1616)

8 [...] woman is an excellent ornament of men since she is granted to man not only to procreate children, and administer the family, but also in possession and, as it were, in dominion, over which man may exercise his jurisdiction and authority. For the authority of man extends not only to inanimate things and brute beasts, but also to reasonable creatures, that is, women and wives.
Cornelius a Lapide, *Omnes divi pauli Epistolas Commentaria* (1638)

Recent criticism

9 *Othello* is partly set in Italy, a setting that in Shakespeare's plays both reflects, and offers a contrast to, the audience's England. Italians are 'Southern' like the Asians, different from the English, but when they are placed against the Moors, they are part of Christian Europe. Othello, 'the Moor of Venice' is a Moor who cannot fully become a part of Venice.
Ania Loomba, 'Othello and the Racial Question' from *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (2002)

10 Venice was famed for its mercantile prosperity, its proud resources of gold and treasure, the splendour of its architecture and exuberance of its art, the intensity and ceremony of public life [...] its reputation makes it a probable setting for luxurious living and extravagant fancy; but [...] it is a city of commercial know-how where money can be made by ruthless exploitation.
Philip Brockbank, *Introduction to Volpone* (1997)

11 Venice, to an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience was a byword for new money, for the new unscrupulous capitalism that was successfully challenging the old European feudal powers. Setting a play in Venice in Shakespeare's time was like setting one on Wall Street now. It told the audience that the context for the action was money, commerce, dynamic capitalism [...] Venice is on the one hand a shorthand name for vigorous capitalism and its ability to break through boundaries and mix up things which had previously been well-defined, a racial and religious melting pot looking with one eye towards the Christian civilization of the West and with the other towards the Islamic infidels of the East [...]

But on the other hand, Venice is also a byword for exotic vices and unbridled passions, a part of the Italian vogue, the craze for setting plays in Italy which had been raging since the end of the sixteenth century in the English theatre [...] it was the land of the atheistic, amoral political theorist, Machiavelli, of intriguing intrigues and perfidious poisoners. It was a place full of tight political plots and loose women.
Fintan O'Toole, *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life* (1990, 2000)

12 Although the number of people of colour in England was growing during the sixteenth century, they were still unusual enough to be treated as wonders. The Scottish court had a long tradition of employing black entertainers whom they treated as little more than performing animals: at James's marriage to Anne of Denmark, celebrated in Oslo in 1589, four young black men danced naked in the snow in front of the royal carriage, subsequently dying of cold. From the 1570s African slaves were regularly brought to England, where they were set to work as household servants to the fashionable, as prostitutes, or as dancers and musicians in court entertainments. Their numbers are difficult to estimate, but were high enough to arouse official disapproval.
Julia Briggs, *This Stage-Play World* (1983, 1997)

13 The question of women's moral equality was as keenly debated in the Renaissance as their intellectual equality has been in the twentieth century. Collections of misogynist sayings and tales were countered with lists and lives of virtuous women from the Bible and the classics. By the sixteenth century, defences had come to outnumber attacks, although the majority of the contributors on both sides were men.
Julia Briggs, *This Stage-Play World* (1983, 1997)

14 *Othello* is set against the backdrop of the wars between Venice and Turkey that raged in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Cyprus, which is the setting for most of the action, was a Venetian outpost attacked by the Turks in 1570 and conquered the following year. Shakespeare's information on the Venetian-Turkish conflict probably derives from *The History of the Turks* by Richard Knolles (1603).
www.sparknotes.com

15 Venice [...] in the sixteenth century was a powerful city-state, important to Europe as a commercial centre and to the whole of Christendom as protector of the Christian faith against the Turkish infidels [...] Venetian society is orderly, law-abiding, and formal [...] Cyprus, the setting for the rest of the play, is far less secure. The island had belonged to Venice for more than a hundred years when, about 1570, the Turks began to attack it. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus led to the famous sea-battle of Lepanto in 1571; and although Shakespeare's play was written thirty years after this, his courtly audience in 1604 would have been recently reminded of the battle by a poem on the subject written by their new monarch, James I.
www.croftstudycentre.freeserve.co.uk

Three women: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca

The action in *Othello* takes place within a very male setting. In Venice it takes place in the street and in the Senate. The only woman who is seen at all – let alone speaks – is Desdemona. In the military garrison on Cyprus there are three women:

- Desdemona, wife of the General Othello
- Emilia, her servant and wife of Iago
- Bianca, a Venetian courtesan.

■ Work in threes with each person taking responsibility for working on one of the female characters. Prepare a statement in role about who you are, your relationships with other characters in the play, and what your function in the play is. For example, Emilia might mention her importance to the plot when she gives Iago the handkerchief. Bianca, on the other hand, might stress her contribution to one of the themes of the play: the exploitation of women by men.

■ Watch the presentations and talk about the following:

- what you learned about the women characters and the function they seem to have in the play
- any comments or interpretations with which you disagree
- similarities and differences in the ways in which different students interpreted the characters
- whether or not you think the gender of the student made a difference to the way in which they presented their character.

Categorising women

Listed below are some of the broad categorisations critics have used to describe the female characters in Renaissance drama.

- Characters of intellect
- Characters of passion and imagination
- Triumphant women
- Pathetic women
- Good wives
- Outspoken females
- Suffering women
- Villainesses
- Passive women
- Independent wives
- Rural simpletons
- Witty ladies
- Young, desirable unmarried women
- Shrewish, discontented older women

- Take each of the female characters in *Othello* in turn:

  - choose the three descriptions which you think describe each of the women characters most closely, providing evidence from the play to support your choices
  - identify one categorisation with which you do not agree, but which a critic from a different era might have thought appropriate.

- As a class, argue for the categorisations you have chosen and talk about the possible reasons for any differences which emerge (for example, gender, age, ethnic background).

In her book *Reading Shakespeare Historically* the modern feminist and historical critic Lisa Jardine highlights the similarities between the situation in which the three women from different social ranks find themselves.

- Read the extract from her argument and talk about the pattern she identifies.

> In *Othello* three women, of three distinct social ranks, figure prominently in the plot. Desdemona is the daughter of one of Venice's most senior and influential citizens. Bianca is a Venetian courtesan – a woman of substance who supports herself and her household by her liaisons with men of rank (notably Cassio, Othello's second-in-command). Emilia is the wife of Othello's third-in-command, Iago, and personal maid to Desdemona. As women playing active roles within the community the three are occupationally distinct. All three are wrongfully accused of sexual misdemeanour in the course of the play; all three, though unequal in their rank-power, are equally vulnerable to a *sexual* charge brought against them: although the incidents which provoke the slander may be presumed to be of separate and distinct types (as befits the differing social situations in which the three women find themselves), they yield the identical slur, the identical charge of sexual promiscuity – the most readily available form of assault on a woman's reputation. Each takes the accusation (once made) extremely seriously; but the ways these accusations are dealt with by the women themselves have very different consequences, and this is crucial ...
> **Lisa Jardine, 'Why should he call her whore?' in *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (1996)**

- Why do you think Shakespeare includes three women from different positions in society? Why do you think he shows them to be 'equally vulnerable to the sexual charge brought against them'? Some possible reasons are suggested here. Use them as a focus for your discussion, debating which you agree with and adding any more of your own.

  - To have three women wrongly accused makes this a much more powerful theme.
  - It allows the audience to compare the way the women react – Emilia and Bianca are foils for Desdemona.
  - It shows the audience that Desdemona's death is not inevitable.
  - It is a comment on the society of the time.
  - It suggests that in this society all women are victims of men.
  - It suggests that despite living in a male-dominated society, women do not need to be victims.

- You might find it helpful to look again at the contextual material on women in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, included in the 'Before reading' section (pages 13-15).

Exploring the character of Desdemona

Desdemona – names and name-calling

The names and descriptions that people use for Desdemona are particularly important to the plot and themes because Desdemona's reputation is at stake and this is at the heart of the play. Questioning a woman's virtue in public had a much stronger force then than it does now – it could both bring about her downfall and bring her husband's name into disrepute.

- Look at the descriptions of Desdemona below. In each case, identify the speaker and try to find patterns in the way she is seen by other people.
  - Do women describe her differently from men?
  - Are the men divided in the way they describe her?
  - Is she ever described as an ordinary person, with a mixture of faults and virtues?
  - Is she seen as an individual or as a type?
  - How might the names she's called be viewed differently by a modern audience and by audiences at the time the play was written?

the divine Desdemona

our great captain's captain

sport for Jove

O thou black weed

Impudent strumpet!

the more angel she

Devil!

the sweetest innocent
That e'er did lift up eye

a most exquisite lady

lewd minx

truly an obedient lady

super-subtle Venetian

that cunning whore of Venice

the virtuous Desdemona

my fair warrior

An historical reading – calling someone a 'whore'

Lisa Jardine explores the implications of Desdemona being called a 'whore', privately and publicly, in terms of its interpretation at the time the play was written and watched.

- Read what she has to say (page 106) and explore what new insights it gives you into the name-calling of Desdemona and its implications for the play as a whole.

> To understand what happens in *Othello*, I shall argue, it is important to distinguish an offensive remark or gesture (of the kind which remains all too accessible and current) from what was once an indictable offence (but one which, as an integral part of the system of social relations of the early modern period, we no longer recognise). It does not just matter *that* a woman is called 'whore', it matters *when* and *where* she is [...]
>
> In *Othello* the crisis point in the play's presentation of Desdemona comes in Act 4 Scene 2, when Othello publicly defames Desdemona, and Emilia repeats and circulates the defamation (thus reinforcing and confirming it). The seriousness of the incident is explicit, in strong contrast to the earlier easy, casual impugning of Desdemona's honesty amongst male figures in the play, in private and in her absence [...]

Jardine argues that from this point on, Desdemona's case is entirely altered because what in private might be an insult, once made public becomes technical defamation of character.

> [Desdemona has been] publicly designated 'whore' in terms damaging enough to constitute a substantial threat to her reputation. From this point on there is no casual innuendo, no lewd comment on Othello's wife's behaviour or supposed sexual appetite. Desdemona's two remaining scenes focus on her now supposedly culpable sexuality, culminating in her suffocation on her bed, in a state of undress – a whore's death for all her innocence.
>
> [...] I want to suggest that if we allow a historical reading to direct us towards substantial defamation as the crux of the plot in Othello, then we are also led towards a revised reading of the instrumentality of Othello's jealousy. [...] I suggest that once the substantial defamation stands against Desdemona, Othello murders her for adultery, not out of jealousy.
> **Lisa Jardine, 'Why should he call her whore?' in *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (1996)**

Changing behaviour

One of the ways of exploring the function a particular character fulfils in a play is to explore when she appears on stage, with whom and the contribution she makes to the scene (for example as an active participant, as a listener, referred to by other characters, ignored etc.). Do the female characters behave differently depending on whether they are in the presence of other characters, and particularly men? Some of the different contexts in which Desdemona appears are listed here:

- in the Senate
- with her father
- with Othello
- without Othello but with other men, for example Iago or Cassio
- with Emilia
- alone (you might want to consider the significance of the fact that Desdemona is alone for so short a period during the play)
- in public
- in private.

■ Fill in the gaps in the grid on pages 107 and 108. Use this to help you analyse the different aspects of Desdemona's character foregrounded by Shakespeare in each of these contexts. How does he do this (for example, is it through imagery, her behaviour, what she does or does not say, what others do or do not say about her)?

Act/Scene	Lines	Who else is present?	How does she leave?	Comments
Act 1 Scene 3	L.169-298	Othello, Brabantio, Duke, Senators. Desdemona enters with Iago at l.169.	With Othello.	A public scene in which she defends herself. Her assertiveness and courage are revealed in her use of language – clear statements of love for Othello and her determination to follow him. She pleads eloquently with the Duke.
Act 2 Scene 1	L.82-206	Emilia, Iago, Cassio, Roderigo, Gentlemen etc. Othello enters at l.175.	With everyone except Iago and Roderigo.	
Act 2 Scene 3	To l.12 L.244-252	Othello, Cassio and attendants.	Leaves at l.12 with Othello Iago enters at this point. Desdemona re-enters at l.244.	
Act 3 Scene 3	To l.189	Cassio and Emilia; Othello and Iago enter at l.28; Cassio exits at l.34.	Leaves with Emilia at l.89.	

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Act/Scene	Lines	Who else is present?	How does she leave?	Comments
Act 3 Scene 4	To l.164	Emilia and clown; Othello, enters at l.32 and exits at l.94; Iago and Cassio enter at l.102; Bianca enters at l.164.	With Emilia.	
Act 4 Scene 1	L. 213 to end	Iago and Othello; Lodovico Desdemona and attendants enter at l.213.		
Act 4 Scene 2	L. 109 to end	Othello and Emilia begin the scene; Emilia leaves to bring in Desdemona at l.22; Othello leaves at l.94; Desdemona is with Emilia only from l.94-106; she is alone from l.106-109; Emilia re-enters with Iago at l.109.		
Act 4 Scene 3	To end	Othello, Lodovico, Emilia etc. Emilia and Desdemona alone at l.20.		
Act 5 Scene 2	To end (dies at l.126)	Othello, then Emilia.		

Reactions through time

Desdemona is a character who has provoked strong reactions since the play was performed – originally with 'boy' actors playing the role. Included here are responses to (or judgements of) Desdemona from a range of critics, reviewers, actors and directors from the eighteenth century on.

46.00

The video *Studying Othello* also includes critics talking about Desdemona.

- Read each quotation and talk about the different ways in which the critics have responded to her character, using the following questions to focus your discussion.
  - Do you agree with the judgement? Why? Why not?
  - Even if you disagree, do you think there is textual evidence for this reading of Desdemona and her actions?
  - Into which female category do you think each critic would place Desdemona?
  - Can you identify patterns in the responses?
  - What do the responses suggest about the values of the commentator and/or the society in which he or she lived?
  - How do these critical judgements compare to those made by the characters in the play?

1 the soft simplicity of Desdemona, confident of merit and conscious of innocence, her artless perseverance in her suit and her slowness to suspect that she can be suspected are such signs of Shakespeare's skill in human nature as, I suppose, it is vain to seek in any modern writer.
Samuel Johnson (1765)

2 angelic [...] an offering without blemish [...] full of simplicity, softness, and humility [...] she seems calculated to form the most yielding and tender wife. **A.W. Schlegel (1815)**

3 You have no idea how the innocence and playful simplicity of my Desdemona have laid hold on the hearts of the people.
Sarah Siddons on acting the part of Desdemona (pub. 1834)

4 Desdemona displays at times a transient energy, arising from the power of affection; but gentleness gives the prevailing tone to her character – gentleness in its excess – gentleness verging on passiveness – gentleness which not only cannot resent, but cannot resist.
Mrs Jameson (1834)

5 The Lady is little less than a wanton [...] Who can sympathise with Desdemona? [...] She falls in love and makes a runaway match with a blackamoor, for no better reason than that he has told her a braggart story [...] For this she not only violates her duties to her father, her family, her sex, and her country, but she makes the first advances [...] Desdemona has been false to the purity of her sex and condition when she married Othello [...] while compassionating her melancholy fate, we cannot forget the vice of her character [...] Who in real life, would have her for a sister, daughter or wife? **John Quincy Adams (1863)**

6 … she has a habit of fibbing […] Practically, too, she dallies with falsehood: 'I am not merry, but I do beguile the thing I am by seeming otherwise' […] To seem otherwise than she is, in order to obtain her end, is at all times lawful in her estimation. **J.A. Heraud (1865)**

7 an earthly paragon **W.R Turnbull (1892)**

8 ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint […] Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling. **A.C. Bradley (1905)**

9 more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. **A.C. Bradley (1905)**

10 she has been called too gentle and too passive; more recently a basic contradiction has been seen in her, supposed to involve a British softness and modesty and an unassimilated Italianate sophistication and aggressiveness. **Isaac Rosenberg (1961 summing up views of the early 20th century)**

11 Her characteristic lack of self-respect, her tendency toward concealing truth by prevarication. **Allardyce Nicholl (1927)**

12 Desdemona made a very specific decision to marry this man. It seems to be extraordinary for someone, even now, to creep out of the house at ten o'clock at night and go down the road and marry a black general without her father knowing. So that's the main thing I had in my mind about the character. You want someone with the courage of her convictions and the presence of mind to make that decision […] she does deceive Othello because she knows the handkerchief is lost and doesn't say so. That's a big mistake. It's a small lie but in terms of the story it's big. And of course, Iago confronts Othello with the single most important piece of information, psychologically, about Desdemona, which is that she tricked her father. If she can do that to her father, a very rich grandee, she can do it to Othello, and Othello can't deny that. Two incontestable pieces of information. He knows she knows the handkerchief is missing, and he knows she betrayed her father. That makes her in some ways extremely strong, an active participant in the drama, rather than an insipid feeble girl.
Sam Mendes, RNT production (1997)

Critics on women

You have already studied some short critical extracts on the character of Desdemona and, more generally, on the role of women in the play. Included here are two more sustained extracts from arguments by the feminist critic Marilyn French and the race critic Ania Loomba.

- Read each extract, pulling out any points which you find particularly interesting.
- In pairs, talk about what you understand each critic to be arguing. Use the questions listed here to help you explore the ways in which the different interpretations by other readers affect your own reading.
  - Do you find the argument put forward by the critic convincing? If so, why?
  - What insights does this reading give you into the play as a whole and the 'women question' in particular?
  - Is there anything about which you would like to challenge the critic? If so, try and put into words what it is you disagree with and why.

> Othello's values are those of aristocratic Venice; Iago's are those of its underside. Iago has contempt for the feminine principle, for women, and feeling, and sex. Othello, without his awareness, shares this contempt. The first clue to this is his behaviour in the Senate chamber. Othello swears that as truly 'as to heaven/I do confess the vices of my blood,/So justly to your grave ears I'll present/How I did thrive in this fair lady's love' (Act 1 Scene 3 l.122-125). The comparison seems inept, but Othello is never inept. Unconsciously, he is associating love with vice. In his effort to persuade the Senate that his commission will take priority over his marriage, he uses terms that could be Iago's: if he neglects his work for love, he says, 'Let housewives make a skillet of my helm' (Act 1 Scene 3 l.272). In response to the order to leave immediately before the consummation of his marriage, he says 'With all my heart.' He accepts the commission for Cyprus with 'a natural and prompt alacrity'. He seems to have no regret whatever about leaving Desdemona. When she demurs and asks to go with him, he seconds her, but assures the Senate that he wants her 'not/To please the palate of my appetite [..]. but to be free and bounteous to her mind' (Act 1 Scene 3 l.261, 262, 265). We might assume from this that Othello has a weak or undemanding sensual nature indeed – one critic has so concluded – but this is the same man who later tells Desdemona she is 'so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet/That the sense aches at thee' (Act 4 Scene 2 l.68-69).
>
> Othello's denial of the erotic element in love is related to Iago's denial of the loving element in eros. Both denials emerge from a need to separate love (the inlaw aspect) from sex (the outlaw). Both attempt to control sexuality, Othello by idealizing it, Iago by demeaning it: 'But we have reason to control our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion' (Act 1 Scene 3 l.329-332). Both men assume that love and lust are related; Othello tries to purify the lustfulness from love, and Iago tries to rationalise the love out of lust [...]
>
> However, misogynistic cultures, because they need the women they despise, always contain a safety pocket. They open a very narrow gate, through which pass those women considered purified from taint, and thus elevated. Othello, Cassio and the play itself exalt one woman, Desdemona, as being above the common run. Cassio describes Desdemona in terms that any

mortal would have trouble living up to: she 'paragons description'; she is so divine that even nature gives her homage [...]

These two attitudes – one exalting, one degrading, neither able to deal with the reality – towards women, and particularly towards Desdemona, are contrasted in Act 2 Scene 3 1.15-29, in the dialogue of Cassio and Iago about Desdemona and sex, but they come into direct confrontation in Act 3 Scene 3. And in this scene, it is Othello, not Iago, who associates vulnerability to feeling with bestiality [...]

There are two kinds of women, one being superhuman, totally virtuous. (Even Iago believes there are such things as virtuous women, see Act 2 Scene 3, l. 360-361; Act 4 Scene 1 1.46-47). The other kind is a dissembler, a deceiver, because of sexuality; she is thus subhuman, bestial, capable of any degradation. And the two kinds are mutually exclusive. One can cross into the subhuman camp at any time, but once in it, one can never return. So Othello, perceiving taint in Desdemona for the first time, is deeply shaken. Her later, frightened deception about the handkerchief will clinch the case against her.

Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience – the late tragedies* (1981)

There are two common threads in Brabantio's, Iago's, and Othello's lines – first, that this match is unusual, 'unnatural', and therefore especially fragile, and second, that women are inconstant and deceitful. Whether Othello imbibes these beliefs from Iago, or Iago only plays upon what Othello already believes, the point is that for all of them male jealousy hinges upon racial difference as well as upon female infidelity.

Italian, and especially Venetian, women were reputed to be particularly licentious. Iago tells Othello:

> In Venice they do let God see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
> Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown. (Act 3 Scene 3 1.206-8)

Contemporary writings suggested that Italian women were 'very lewd and wicked, for even in the ancient city of Rome, there are many thousands of lewd living women that pay monthly unto the Pope for the sinful use of their wicked bodies'. Venice was repeatedly pictured as a city full of whores, and it was often personified as one.

Ania Loomba, 'Othello and the Racial Question' from *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (2002)

28.00, 46.00, 48.35

The video *Studying Othello* includes critics and students talking the representation of the women in *Othello* and the characters of Desdemona and Emilia.

Iago, though primarily the manipulator of these conflicts in the other men is also the victim of his own. His cynical generalizations are, like those of Jaques, the parody and inverse of the romantics' claims; they are self-conscious, self-aggrandizing, and divorced from reality: "My muse labours / And thus she is deliver'd" (II.i.127–28). Like the other men, he accepts generalizations—especially generalizations about women—as true, provided they are "apt and of great credit" (II.i.282), "probable, and palpable to thinking" (I.ii.76). Like the others, he is careful not to contaminate his fantasies with facts. Roderigo does not court Desdemona in person, Cassio does not sue for his position directly, Othello does not immediately confront Desdemona and Cassio with his suspicions, and Iago never tries to ascertain whether Emilia is promiscuous.[20] In fact he has little contact with the women in the play. He is at ease in Act II, engaging Desdemona in witty banter, but he is subdued and almost speechless in Act IV when confronted with her misery and fidelity. Like Brabantio, Iago assumes that "consequence" will "approve" his "dream" (II.iii.58) and ignores evidence to the contrary.

Even protected as it is from reality, Iago's cynicism has cracks just as Othello's idealism does. He has a grudging admiration for Desdemona's "blest condition," Othello's "constant, noble, loving nature" (II.i.289), and Cassio's "daily beauty" (V.i.19). He aspires to Cassio's job and Othello's "content" and tries to identify with their love for Desdemona—"now I do love her too" (II.i.286), though this love is immediately subsumed under notions of lust and revenge. The tension between his theoretical misogyny and his occasional intimations of Desdemona's virtue drive him to resolve the conflict, to turn that virtue "into pitch" (II.iii.351) just as his verses extravagantly praise the deserving woman, the better to be able to diminish her. Othello's conflict has the opposite issue; he murders Desdemona to redeem her from degradation.

The women in *Othello* are not murderous, and they are not foolishly idealistic or foolishly cynical as the men are. From the start they, like the comedy heroines, combine realism with romance, mockery with affection. Bianca comically reflects the qualities of the women as Roderigo does those of the men. The play explicitly identifies her with the other women in the overheard conversation about her which Othello takes to be about Desdemona and in her response to Emilia's attack: "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you, that thus abuse me" (V.i.120–21). At this point, Iago tries to fabricate evidence against her just as Othello, in the scene immediately following, fabricates a case against Desdemona. Bianca's active, open-eyed, enduring affection is similar to that of the other women.

She neither romanticizes love nor degrades sex. She sees Cassio's callousness but accepts it wryly—"'Tis very good, I must be circumstanc'd" (III.iv.199). She mocks him to his face, but not behind his back as he does her. Her active pursuit of Cassio is in contrast to his indifference, to Roderigo's passivity, and to Othello's naiveté. When jealous, she accuses Cassio openly and continues to feel affection for him. The play's humanization of her, much like, for example, that of the bourgeois characters at the end of *Love's Labor's Lost,* underlines the folly of the male characters who see her as merely whore.

Emilia articulates the balanced view which Bianca embodies—"and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge" (IV.iii.92–93). She, like other Shakespearean shrews, especially Beatrice and Paulina, combines sharp-tongued honesty with warm affection. Her views are midway between Desdemona's and Bianca's and between those of the women and those of the men. She rejects the identification with Bianca yet sympathizes with female promiscuity. She corrects Desdemona's occasional naiveté but defends her chastity. Although she comprehends male jealousy and espouses sexual equality, she seems remarkably free of jealousy herself. She wittily sees cuckoldry and marital affection as compatible: "Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?" (IV.iii.74–75). She understands but tolerates male fancy; the dangers of such tolerance become evident in this play as they never do in the comedies.

Desdemona's and Emilia's contrasting viewpoints in the willow scene have led critics to think of them as opposites, but they have much in common. When we first see them together, they encourage and participate in Iago's misogynist banter but reject his stereotypes. Desdemona here defends Emilia from Iago's insults just as Emilia will ultimately defend Desdemona from Othello's calumny. While Desdemona is no shrew (though she might be said to approach one in the matter of Cassio's reinstatement), her love is everywhere tempered by realism and wit like that of the comedy heroines. During courtship she hides, as they did, behind a sort of disguise—not literal male dress but the assumption of a pose of docility and indifference which conceals her passion from both her father and Othello. Like Iago's deserving woman she is one that could "think, and ne'er disclose her mind, / See suitors following, and not look behind" (II.i.156–57). Eventually, though, she takes the lead in the courtship as the heroines do; she finds an excuse to be alone with Othello, mocks him by speaking of him "dispraisingly" (III.iii.73), and traps him into a proposal using indirection not unlike Rosalind's with Orlando.[21]