

## THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WOMEN DURING THE RENAISSANCE WITH REFERENCE TO WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

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**Abstract:** The Renaissance was a time of 're-birth' – for institutions as well as individuals. But (to borrow Joan Kelly's words) was there a Renaissance for women as well? Did this glorious movement shower its benefits on the advancement of the female intellect? In my paper I would like to explore such questions, referring specifically to Shakespeare's *Othello*.

**Keywords:** England, *Othello*, Renaissance, Women.

**Introduction:** Jacob Burckhardt wrote in 1860, "Women (during the Renaissance), stood on a footing of perfect equality with men. There was no question of 'woman's rights' or female emancipation, simply because the thing itself was a matter of course...the same intellectual and emotional development which perfected the man was demanded for the perfection of the woman." [1]

In 1928, Virginia Woolf, writing about women in the English Renaissance, remarked, "She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she's all but absent from history...some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read...and was the property of her husband...locked up, beaten and flung about the room." [2] This "queer, composite being" (who was "imaginatively of the highest importance; practically...completely insignificant" [3]) of poetry and social history expresses all the contradictions in the idea of feminism and Renaissance studies.

Judith Shakespeare, William Shakespeare's fictitious gifted sister, is Woolf's tribute in *A Room Of One's Own* (1929) to all those women in Renaissance England who were divested of their talents and ambitions by the restrictions imposed on their sex. In her work, Woolf refers to Prof. Trevelyan (whose historical records she studied) and notes that these women had no money, they were married off at the young age of fifteen or sixteen (as soon as they were 'out of the nursery'), disregarding their wills or wishes.

Woolf claims that in catering to the demands of their homes and families, these women had neither the opportunities nor the 'room' to become independent, free-thinking individuals. "Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have...ended her days ...half-witch, half-wizard, feared and mocked at" [4], notes Woolf.

Woolf's story leads to some very disturbing questions about the position of women in the sixteenth century Renaissance England. Was there a Renaissance at all for women at the time when men were reaping its rich harvest? Did the discourse of Humanism offer any liberating possibilities to women as it did to men? Woman, during the Renaissance, was actually a "queer, composite being" [5] – seemingly independent and emancipated but practically fettered and exploited. Women suffered as the family and political life were

"restructured in the great transition from medieval feudal society to the early modern state" [6], points out Joan Kelly. The relation of the sexes was restructured to one of male domination and female dependency. The Renaissance liberated men from natural, social and ideological constraints, opened possibilities for cultural expression, but had almost the opposite effect upon women. The programme of Humanism was designed to produce eloquent and cultivated individuals equipped with urbanity and civility, necessary for a full social participation in the higher strata of civic life. Its offering of a 'liberal' introduction to statecraft and government was attractive to a class of leisured aristocrats. Humanist endeavours of the sixteenth century promised theoretical access to women, yet what this 'education' entailed in terms of the subject training it imparted and the select class of women it targeted, bears closer scrutiny. It was only women of the aristocracy, the higher ranks to whom education was available, for it was seen as an added ornament in their existing treasury of needlework, painting and music. To equip women to translate and write the occasional literary treatise was the literary aim of humanism for women. Women were kept away from subjects that required a political or radical engagement. According to women was practically useless. "Active civic virtue" [7] – the professed goal of a humanist education – being denied to women, the "humanist celebrants of learned women fall back on insisting on the learned woman's iconic chastity." [8] Lorna Hutson notes that women were associated with a domestic resource which has a capacity to err, and which therefore, must be mastered by the 'good husband'.

In Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier*, despite the attractive illusion of spontaneity in the dialogue, the position articulated for women is far more inferior and of less social power and sexual freedom than articulated by the poetic text of the medieval tradition of 'amor courtois' and hence, Castiglione's discourse is not liberating for women but rather entraps and contains them in a newer discourse of love and marriage. He uses images which dismember and dehumanize the woman, making her an object and subject of the male gaze. The Renaissance lady may play an aesthetically significant role in Castiglione's idealized court but he clearly removed her from that equal position in social discourse. Male educators, as humanists, suppressed romance and

chivalry to further classical culture, with all its patriarchal and misogynist bias. As Joan Kelly points out, Castiglione makes 'charm' the noblewoman's primary occupation and aim. He called upon her to "give up certain 'unbecoming' physical activities such as riding and handling weapons." [9] Her role was thus merely decorative, she was a 'defective man'.

In the literature of Shakespeare's time, women readers were wooed and railed at, remarks Stephen Greenblatt. It was generally agreed that it was the duty of women to be 'chaste, dutiful, shame-fast, silent', the argument was whether women fulfilled or fell short of this proper role. Learned women writers did not engage themselves in public debates but rather translated devotional literature into English (eg. Margaret More, Anne Bacon etc.). the religious form appeared "non-threatening" [10], as Rina Ramdev remarks.

This is the reason why women were granted ready allowance in this case. Sir Thomas More supported the education of women of a certain class in the interest of piety, and for keeping women 'occupied and out of trouble'. Female authors were castigated for having failed to live up to the Renaissance ideal of the chaste, silent, obedient woman if there was any form of self-advertisement in their writings. Female authors often apologized for exposing themselves to the public gaze. According to Lisa Jardine, Humanist educators stressed the identity of eloquence and moral virtue for men but while addressing women, associated public speaking and writing with sexual promiscuity.

Within the framework of Protestant reforms, a woman's freedom to think and act for herself became further circumscribed within that of her family. The family became under Protestantism a little kingdom in its own right, ruled benevolently by the fathers supported by maternal solicitude. A woman could debate the scriptures with men and put her religious awareness on display only within the confines of her home and within the accepted hierarchy, that is, of a willing second place to her husband. Women within Protestantism still encountered suspicion and hatred.

The fact of having a woman on the throne of England as Head of State and as the head of Church did not quite lead to the emancipation of women. Elizabeth I could only exert her power within clearly defined limits which were set by wily courtiers, statesmen, bishops—all working for personal political ends. Interestingly, Elizabeth never appointed any woman to a position of prominence within the administration, notes Rina Ramdev. The Queen was metamorphosed as 'magnified female virtue'—the Virgin Queen—she remained at the level of emblem only. Her own femininity faded into insignificance. Her being on the throne was seen as the filling of a place reserved for men. According to Stephen Greenblatt, Elizabeth's person, as England's crowned Head, was mystically divided between her mortal 'body natural' and the immortal 'body politic'. Even when she grew old, weak, iconography represented

her in youthful, ageless beauty. In political terms, therefore, her sex was a matter of no significance or consequence, a thing indifferent.

During the Renaissance, women who asserted their views too vigorously were at the risk of being perceived as shrewish and labelled 'scolds'. Such women came to be regarded as a threat to the public order, to be dealt with by the local authorities. Public humiliation was a preferred method of correction. Such punishment was usually intensified by a procession through the town to the sound of rough music, the banging together of pots and pans. Stephen Greenblatt points out that "the same cruel festival accompanied the 'carting' or 'riding' of those accused of being whores" [11]. Women who married inappropriately were publicly shamed through 'charivari'. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Desdemona's marriage to Othello is miscegenation—she, a "fair, white Venetian" [12], rejected the "curled darlings of the nation" [13] (like Roderigo) and instead married the "sooty-bosomed" [14] Moor (Othello). The abusive language, the noisy clamour under Brabantio's window and the violence of the opening scene of the play can be regarded as a charivari, organized in protest over the marriage of the play's central characters, points out M.D. Bristol. Desdemona begins with a powerful voice, trumpeting her love for Othello to the world with a self-declared "downright violence" [15], too much violence for some tastes, as E. Pechter notes. She posits herself as an independent, head-strong woman who defies her father and thereby, the patriarchal norms, in eloping with Othello—a black African Moor. She espouses the Protestant ideal of marriage—based on companionship and mutual regard. Othello's blackface has been transformed in her eyes by the superiority of his mind. She ignores his race and colour. Their marriage is, for her, a holy bond, whereas for the others, it is a sexually driven relationship between what is conventionally seen as hideous and repellant with what is most beautiful and desirable.

According to M.D. Bristol, what is distinctive about Desdemona is the way she embodies the category of an 'ideal wife' in its full contradictories. She has been described as chaste or even as still a virgin and also as sexually aggressive. Desdemona appears remarkably forward and aggressive in Othello's account, particularly in relation to the Renaissance expectations of normative female behavior. She devours his discourse with a "greedy ear" [16] and is the first of the two to hint at the possibility of their loving each other. She is outspoken and assertive, as well as generous and devoted. In her speech to Brabantio about her "divided duty" [17], as a wife and a daughter, Desdemona shows herself to be poised and intelligent, as capable of loving as of being loved, and able to weigh her competing loyalties respectfully and judiciously. In arguing for her right to accompany Othello to Cyprus, she insists upon the "violence" [18] and unconventionality of her attachment to Othello. In declaring "I did love the Moor to live

withhim"[19], she frankly insists on the sexual nature of her love. As the plot progresses, her sexual aggressiveness will upset Othello more and more.

The sexual banter between Iago and Desdemona in Act 2, Scene 1, creates a nervous, uncomfortable atmosphere, in part because their levity is inappropriate, given that Othello's ship remains missing. The rhyming couplets in which Iago expresses his misogynistic insults lend them an eerie, alienating quality and Desdemona's active encouragement and participation has been seen by critics as somewhat puzzling. Once again, she establishes herself as outspoken and independent - a threat to the Renaissance society, she needed to be "tamed" into submission. She does not depend upon her husband's presence either socially or intellectually. However, Desdemona does not suggest that she has any intention to cheat on her husband. The interlude that follows between Othello and Desdemona contrasts Iago's cynicism and misogyny to Othello's sentimentality and chivalry - which, in the larger Renaissance framework can be seen as the contrast between the realistic view towards women (that is, Iago's view of women as "wild-cats in your kitchen, saints in your injuries..."[20]) and their deification/idolization by the sonnet tradition (that is, Othello's view of woman as "My fair warrior"[21]).

Emilia, Iago's wife (not particularly loved by him), is introduced in less than respectful tones by him. He constructs her as a talkative, shrewish, heartless woman: "Alas! She has no speech"[22] says Desdemona, dismissing Iago's nasty complaints about Emilia's noisiness. Desdemona seems right until the middle of the play. Emilia has no existence apart from her instrumentality in the plot. She passes the handkerchief to Iago, but does not know what she is doing: "what he will/Heaven knows, not I, / I nothing, but to please his fantasy"[23]. According to Bradley, "till close to the end, she frequently sets one's teeth on edge; and at the end one is ready to worship her... From the moment of her appearance after the murder, to the moment of her death she is transfigured"[24]. In the last scene, "her glorious carelessness of her own life and her outbursts against Othello overwhelm us"[25]. Emilia's greatest character development occurs in Act 4, Scene 2. According to E. Pechter, Emilia's change takes place quietly under the diversely inflected reiteration of "my husband"[26]. The play does not specify what is going through her mind.

Act 4, Scene 2 begins with Othello and Emilia discussing about Desdemona - Othello trying to find the "ocular proof"[26] of her supposed adultery and Emilia trying to assert her mistress's loyalty, honesty and fidelity towards Othello. Othello calls Emilia and Desdemona "a simple bawd"[27] and a "subtle whore"[28] respectively. According to Lynda Boose, in Othello, it is not just Othello who calls the woman he loves a whore - it is every male in the play, who has any narrative relationship with the woman.

In the Willow Song scene, Emilia becomes the rebel as

she declares that she would not mind being unfaithful to her husband in the right circumstances, revealing considerably less naivety than Desdemona who barely believes that a wife can ever be disloyal or unfaithful to her husband. Emilia has a blasphemous attitude towards marriage, which acts as a foil for Desdemona (who considers marriage a holy bond). According to Lynda Boose, Emilia's attempt to contain her resentment inside of the accepted double standards is, however, only partially successful, and thus she concludes this scene with an angry outburst that essentially justifies a woman's adultery by insisting that women, too, have affections, desires for sport and frailty. The power Emilia claims after Desdemona's murder by Othello takes the form of affectionate loyalty that she feels for Desdemona, points out Edward Pechter. As Emilia begins to intuit the truth - "I think upon't, I think I smell't, O villainy!"[29] - her indignant exclamations give way to quiet reflection. The thoughtfulness of Emilia's " 'tis proper I obey him (Iago) - but not now, / Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home"[30] is directly opposite to the mindlessness of - "I, nothing, but to please his fantasy"[31] - at the beginning. Absorbed then into the conventional narrative of wifely obedience, she now seeks to do something Othello himself couldn't have done, find a position of her own outside the space defined by Iago's malignant norms - in her case, literally outside Iago's home. Emilia is not sure about what she is doing or where she is going, she makes it all up as she goes along, feeling her way into a new self-hood, or into selfhood at last, remarks E. Pechter. Given the limited possibilities for women in the Renaissance, it is unclear where Emilia can go. Before we can consider such possibilities, she is abruptly stabbed and murdered.

The Willow Song scene punctuates the tragic moment in the play. Desdemona has doubly transgressed patriarchal norms (by elopement and miscegenation). The idea of her 'disorderliness' is actually imagined. As Natalie Z. Davis points out, the female sex was thought the disorderly one par excellence in England during the Renaissance. The disorderliness was founded in physiology. The female was composed of cold and wet humors (the male was hot and dry) - implying changeable, deceptive and tricky temperament. Her womb was like a hungry animal. The lower ruled the higher within the woman. The entire play is a journey into making Othello believe that Desdemona has transgressed. Even though she's spurned by Othello, she still loves him. There is a reversal of roles - unconditional love and adoration now come from the woman for the man.

The Willow Song expresses woman's anger and anguish. In this private scene, Desdemona articulates her protests and lamentation - something that she can't do in front of Othello, because she has been stuffed and silenced with the voice of patriarchy. In the song, the maid sings about her husband's adultery, but, she blames the other woman and exonerates the man, thereby proving that she has internalized the patriarchal and sexist discourse.

Men colour all women with sexual transgression, there by making it collective. Men have anxieties and are paranoid about women.

In the Temptation Scene, Othello asks Iago for the “ocular proof”[32] of Desdemona’s supposed adultery, which titillates Othello. Ocular proof refers to the idea of female private parts, which need to be revealed. Othello and Iago, share an excitement about the hidden (which builds up the pornographic aesthetic of the play). Anatomists in the Renaissance represented the female body with horror, it was the unsaid or the blank.

According to Patricia Parker, Othello’s dialogue with Iago, full of punning links between “monster and show”[33], “hideous”[34] and “hid”[35] - lead to Othello’s suspicion of “closed dilations, working from the heart”[36] and then to hunger for information. Othello now sees female sexuality as monstrous, seductive and dangerous. Desdemona has now become the “fair devil”[37] - the same woman who was earlier idolized, is now eroticized and demonized.

“Hot, hot and moist”[38] - are Othello’s words when he touches Desdemona’s hands. This refers to her steaming sexuality which cannot be contained and therefore has to be punished. He no longer loves her. He wants her to be a pure, chaste, sullied, submissive and tame wife - as was normative for all women in Renaissance England. Any deviation from this norm was seen as disorderliness. Desdemona is imagined disorderly first by Iago and then by Othello despite her humility and modesty. Othello slaps her in front of Lodovico to publicly humiliate her - because women who transgress need to be punished. After the incident, Desdemona turns into an ‘obedient lady’, a passive Christian wife who constantly strives to please her husband. She has internalized the patriarchal ideology which requires women to accept that: “Mine husband is my superior, my better; he hath authority to rule over me”[39] (from William Whatley’s conduct book). The chivalric tradition uses Desdemona as the mistress only till the love is requited. In the end, she is sacrificed at the altar of patriarchy. Though she began with a beautiful, assertive voice, she seems to dwindle away during the course of the play, and “nobody. I

myself”[40] in her final speech seems to “constitute an act of self-erasure, an accession to nullity”[41].

The Bianca episode (absent in Cinthio’s story) was deliberately introduced by Shakespeare to show female disorderliness at different levels. Bianca is a prostitute who has actually transgressed the norms of the patriarchal society (unlike Desdemona - an imagined prostitute, or Emilia - an imagined pimp). Desdemona’s fairness is like the blackened fairness of Bianca. Bianca’s rejection of the handkerchief (with the strawberries, a symbol of chastity) given to her by Cassio, shows her rejection of chastity. She serves as a foil to Desdemona. Othello’s epithet for Desdemona - “cunning whore of Venice”[42] - immediately connects her with Bianca and makes the contrast very stark. Emilia denounces Bianca as “Fie, Fie upon thee strumpet!”[43] - even though she had earlier admitted that sexual infidelity is an entirely thinkable option, when she hears Iago frame his accusation of Bianca, she immediately reclaims the position of moral superiority by joining her husband.

According to Lynda Boose, both Desdemona and Emilia, ironically, constantly assert their moral superiority vis-à-vis the fallen woman (or the prostitute) who has transgressed. For instance, in the Willow Song, they blame other women for causing problems between husbands and wives. Even Bianca transfers her anger into a jealous accusation that the handkerchief given to her by Cassio is a copy and is some “Minx’s token”[44].

Within the play, the whore “that all the men imagine and with which term they so quickly brand the women they love, is a label that for the women is so threatening that all the three of them circle warily around it, desperate to extricate themselves from its condemnation that they willingly displace it onto other women as if such a displacement would stand as a proof of their own purity.

Thus, there was no renaissance for women - at least not during the Renaissance, as pointed out by Joan Kelly. Women experienced a contraction of social and personal options unlike men. Women who did indulge their talents and ambitions did so within conditions of confinement and privacy.

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