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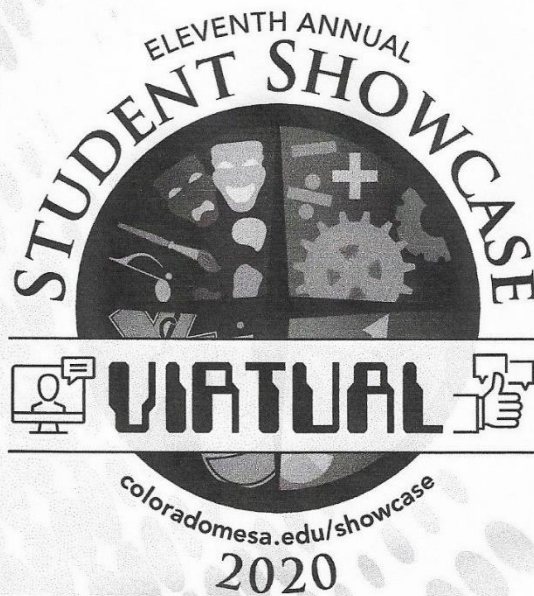
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PROJECT TITLE:

Desdemona and Emilia: The Liminal Space between Goddess and Whore



*The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* is a renaissance tragedy play written by William Shakespeare in 1603. This play centers around a successful, high ranking moor employed by the Venetian military, Othello, and his duplicitous ensign Iago. Throughout the play Iago preys upon Othello's marriage to the Venetian Desdemona by making him believe that she has been unfaithful with his lieutenant, Cassio. One of the ways in which Iago is able to dupe Othello is through employing his own wife, Emilia—Desdemona's attendant, to help him obtain a handkerchief which then becomes the source of evidence of the affair. The actions that Desdemona and Emilia exercise throughout the play center around their sexuality and highlight the social construct of the female role in renaissance Europe that both governed a woman and left her in a precarious position as she attempted to gain agency over her life. This construct limited women to occupying one of two roles—goddess or whore. In an article, Katharine Eisaman Maus draws attention to the valorization of purity among women and the subsequent heightened anxiety among men in regard to a woman's sexual fidelity. She writes, "historians report [that] the opprobrious terms cuckold, whore, and whore master account for most of the defamation suits brought [forth] in sixteenth century church courts" (562). This anxiety is manifested in the male characters throughout the entirety of *Othello*. Iago first calls attention to his own anxiety about his wife's sexual infidelity in his first soliloquy, "I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / [H'as] done my office" (1.3.386-388). Here, Iago is stating that Othello has been assuming Iago's role as husband between his sheets with Emilia—or more plainly stated, Othello has had sexual relations with Iago's wife. Although Shakespeare never gives us any steadfast evidence of this affair, Emilia does allude to seeking advancement for her husband through her sexuality in conversation with Desdemona where she poses the question, "...who / would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a / monarch?" (4.3.75-77). Through this statement, Emilia is

saying that any wife would have an affair if the result was her husband becoming King—thereby establishing her willingness to gain agency through her sexuality. In addition, Desdemona's own action of eloping with the Moor contributes to Othello's insecurities and anxiety about her virtue; her own father warns Othello in Act I, "Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see; / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (1.3.292-293). How can this goddess/whore dichotomy help one gain a better understanding of Desdemona and Emilia? Which category do they fall into? Furthermore, can both women be viewed as kindred spirits despite the fact that it seems on the surface Emilia has contributed to Desdemona's death? By focusing on two main commonalities between Desdemona and Emilia, a better understanding of their actions throughout the play can be established, and in turn, one can read them as both sharing similar motivations. In a society where women were governed by the goddess/ whore dichotomy, Emilia and Desdemona recognized the social constructs placed on them and, in order to break free, both sought a path to empowerment through her sexuality—attempting to occupy a liminal space between the two extremes.

Part of the complexity of both Desdemona and Emilia is the fact that both women seem, on the surface, to contradict themselves through their actions and language—in one instance seeming to fight against the system which limits them and takes their agency, and in the next attempting to conform to that system by playing the role of obedient wife. I argue that what looks on the surface like a contradiction within their characters is actually proof that both women were highly aware of the social construct that governed them and, as such, were exercising just enough agency through their actions and language as to not be cast entirely into the whore category—but rather to occupy a middle ground between whore and the nearly unobtainable goddess category. In an article by Emily C. Bartels, she asserts, "that [this] middle ground proffers the safety of the

first option without the radicality of the second and allows women to be actors: to speak out through, rather than against, established postures and make room for self-expression within self-suppressing roles” (419). Through examination of the court scene when Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, appears before the Duke to bring charges against the moor for eloping with his daughter, we can see just how Desdemona makes her first move to occupy this middle ground. First, Brabantio’s diction needs to be considered as it demonstrates the severity of the elopement, “She is abus’d, stol’n from me, and corrupted...” (1.3.60). The word “corrupted” here is of significance because, by saying that Desdemona has been corrupted, Brabantio is in essence saying that she has fallen from the female role of goddess and is now occupying the space of whore within the female construct of Venetian society. However, Desdemona’s response to the charges makes it clear that she is able to use her cunning know-how of the system to her advantage to ensure she is not cast entirely into the whore category. Desdemona says in response to her father’s accusations, “I do perceive here a divided duty: / To you I am bound for life and education” (1.3.181-182). Here she acknowledges the social construct that labels her as her father’s property. Desdemona goes on to point out though, that the same social construct also mandates that she be dutiful to her husband, “I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband; / And so much my duty as my mother show’d / To you, preferring you before her father” (1.3.185-187). By paralleling her actions to that of her mother’s, Desdemona positions herself as adhering to a part of the social construct; she is neither whore, as her actions would originally determine, nor is she pure goddess—because her elopement cannot be completely ignored—therefore, she has created a liminal space between the two extremes by, “[stressing] her conventionality and [cloaking] her unprecedented marital choices in social and familial precedent” (Bartels 424).

Similarly, Emilia, with rumors of her transgressions with the Moor abroad, must exercise her cunning in order to keep herself from being thrust entirely into the category of whore within society. Thomas D. Bowman writes an article wherein he characterizes Emilia as, “loyal in her sentiments, well-meaning and generous in her impulses, righteous in her intentions, and sensible in her moral standards” (99). I would argue against that characterization, however, and say that Emilia was not entirely loyal or righteous; but rather, she was cunning and, just like Desdemona, created a liminal space for herself within society so that she was not shackled by either goddess or whore role. The lines where Emilia alludes to Desdemona that she has been, or would be willing to be, unfaithful to her husband in order to elevate his standing illustrate her willingness to step outside of the goddess role. In contrast, her language shows her ability to outwardly perform the duty of obedient, submissive wife. For example, when Iago tells Emilia, “You rise to play, and go to bed to work” (2.1.115). Emilia’s response is simply, “You shall not write my praise” (2.1.116). Iago goes on to say, “No, let me not” (2.1.117). Iago is insulting Emilia, yet she makes the conscious choice not to speak against him, but rather, to appear as the dutiful wife. By appearing outwardly to society as fulfilling the goddess role, the rumors of her indiscretion are not enough to cast her fully into the whore category. However, much like how Desdemona’s elopement can’t fully be ignored, neither can the rumors of Emilia’s infidelity. Therefore, Emilia is able to occupy the liminal space between the two extremes by performing the role of goddess outwardly. In addition, Emilia also exercises her wifely duty by bringing Iago Desdemona’s handkerchief. An act, that although she was not aware would lead to Desdemona’s death, one must suspect Emilia recognizes there will be some type of implication for Desdemona as she questions Iago upon giving the handkerchief to him, “What will you do with’t, that you have been / so earnest / To have me filch it? (3.3.313-314). However, despite the fact that Emilia does show, through her language,

concern for how Iago was going to use the handkerchief, she still gives it to him, because she values keeping the liminal space that she has created for herself over loyalty to Desdemona. It is clear then, that both Desdemona and Emilia can be viewed as kindred spirits in the sense that they both display a cunning ability to create a liminal space between the two extreme categories of goddess and whore. In addition, they both value that liminal space over any type of loyalty to other relationships—Desdemona in regard to her father, and Emilia in regard to her friendship with Desdemona.

Another commonality that Desdemona and Emilia share is their fate—death. This fate is brought forth due to a culmination of factors, including the fact that both women have violent, jealous husbands who do not acknowledge that wives can occupy a liminal space between goddess and whore. In an article by Ruth Vanita, she acknowledges that, “several recent critics have sought to explain Othello's behavior as arising from his insecurity as a black in a racist white society” (342). I would disagree with Vanita, however, and assert that Othello's motivation for killing Desdemona, rather than race related, lies in the social construct of the female role during his time, and the fact that it was better to have a dead wife than to have a whore for a wife. Desdemona, even acknowledges, that although she has attempted to occupy a space in between goddess and whore, these new accusations against her—that Othello seems to believe—may be her final undoing.

Unkindness may do much,  
 And his unkindness may defeat my life,  
 But never taint my love. I cannot say “whore.”  
 It does abhor me now I speak the word; (4.2.159-163)

In these lines, it is clear that Desdemona is saying that death would be preferable over being shackled to the role of whore for the rest of her life; simply saying the word “whore” disgusts her. Nothing but persistent, though, Desdemona uses her cunning in an attempt one last time to remain within the liminal space between goddess and whore that she has worked so hard to achieve. She instructs Emilia, “Prithee to-night / Lay on my bed my wedding-sheets—remember; / And call thy husband hither” (4.2.104-106). Just as she was able to catapult herself out of the whore category when her elopement was made public, Desdemona once again attempts to rely on history, to boost her high enough to remain within the middle ground between the two extremes of goddess and whore. She is hoping that the proof of her virginity, the blood that would have left stains on her wedding sheets, will be enough evidence of her virtue to quell her husband’s anxiety about her infidelity.

Desdemona tragically falls short of convincing her husband of her fidelity to him and ultimately ends up murdered at his hands. Similarly, Emilia is also murdered at the hands of her husband Iago. Vanita characterizes Emilia as “a powerless wife like Desdemona herself” (345). I would argue against this claim and bring forth the evidence of Emilia’s speech in the final act of *Othello*. When Emilia sees that Desdemona has died unjustly, she recognizes that the liminal space she has occupied within society, has come at too great a cost. It is in this moment that Emilia chooses to thrust herself into the whore category regardless of the consequences in order to speak the truth. I assert that she does this, not because she is loyal to Desdemona; but rather, Emilia uses this instance in the play to call attention to the problem within society that forces women to fill either the role of goddess or whore. Emilia first does this, by drawing clear attention to the social construct that has ultimately led to Desdemona’s death, stating, “Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak. / ‘Tis proper I obey him; but not now” (5.2.195-196). By addressing the men in the

room and asking their permission to speak the truth, Emilia is drawing attention to the social construct that leaves a woman without a voice. By asking permission in this way, Emilia sheds light on the irony that “men, who spontaneously intervene to save a man from another man's violence, remain ineffectual, albeit deploring, spectators of the escalating violence inflicted by husband on wife” (Vanita, 342). This is further proved to be true as Iago yells, “Villainous whore!” at Emilia and then is able to successfully stab her in a room full of men who very possibly could have thwarted his action (5.2.229).

The valorization of purity and the subsequent dichotomy between goddess and whore that women were forced to occupy during renaissance Europe, created a substantial chasm between men and women. This gap between sexes, and the jealousy and resulting violence that haunted men in regard to their wives did not go unnoticed by Shakespeare. In a play that, upon first glance, may seem to be about racial prejudices, *Othello* proves to have much more depth. Richard Levin commiserates this viewpoint, stating, “that the [play is] about the role of gender in the individual and in society” (126). Furthermore, Levin goes on to claim that patriarchy is the cause of the tragic outcome of the play which, “[operates] though individuals and the society as a whole” (127). I would add to Levin’s assertion that, in addition to highlighting the patriarchal system that placed such strict confines on the identity of a female, *Othello* also highlights the solution to that problem. Through Desdemona and Emilia’s characters and their creation of a liminal space between goddess and whore, Shakespeare creates a piece of literature that subtly says: “Here is the solution! Do not force women to choose between goddess or whore, let them just exist as they are, having traits of both. Do not attempt to place a complex human being into just one category—because when you do, tragedy will ensure.”



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