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*Othello* and the Social Construct of Sexism Against Women

Women throughout history have struggled to gain an equal foothold in society, and the portrayals of women in *Othello* are reflections of this struggle during the early modern period in Europe. The play portrays the female characters as naïve and doltish. Contemporary society still does not differ as much from these seventeenth-century stigmas against women. *Othello* demonstrates the social construct of sexism in western society because it characterizes women as obedient properties and passive creatures, provides a substantial historical context for early modern-era sexism, and presents a comparative medium between historical and contemporary sexism against women.

*Othello* demonstrates the strong sexist leanings that women are passive properties of men. During the first act of *Othello*, Iago, the antagonist, asserts to Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, that he has been “robb’d” by an “old black ram” that is also “tupping [his] white ewe” (Shakespeare 5). The usage of the word “robb’d” suggests the idea that Desdemona is the property of her father and that Othello stole her from him. Brabantio further reinforces this by accusing Othello of being a “foul thief” and asking him where “[had] [he] stow’d [his] daughter” (Shakespeare 13). Both of these scenes disregard the notion that Desdemona has any existent free will to make choices on her own terms and any possibility that maybe it is her own decision to elope with and marry Othello. Another instance of this implication of sexism was at the court of the Duke of Venice. When the Duke asks Brabantio what is his upheaval, Brabantio answers that Desdemona has been “stol’n from [him]” and “[has] [been] abused” and “corrupted”

(Shakespeare 19). Iago exploits Desdemona to actuate his plans to manipulate and destroy Othello, and both Brabantio and Othello are seemingly threatened by the prospect of losing control over Desdemona. Desdemona, a character of passive dispositions, starts blaming herself about Othello's violence against her. Othello, enraged at the idea of Desdemona's infidelity, threatens to "chop her into messes" for making a cuckold out of him (Shakespeare 117). This implies that Othello values his reputation in society more than Desdemona. Desdemona says that "[she] will not stay to offend [Othello]" after he strikes her in a fit of rage and commands her "out of [his] sight" (Shakespeare 119). Instead of standing up for herself like she does against her father at the start of the play, the character development of Desdemona becomes extremely subservient and deferential. Othello eventually kills Desdemona during a violent confrontation. Emilia, Iago's wife, asks a dying Desdemona who is the perpetrator and Desdemona replies that "[she] [herself]" did it. (Shakespeare 159-160).

Despite this, Shakespeare subtly implies that ethos abrogates social duties. After finding out all of Iago's turpitudes, Emilia states that "[it] [is] proper that" she "obeys him" except at that moment (Shakespeare 165). Emilia also explains that the "ills [women] do, [the] [men's] ills instruct [them] so" (Shakespeare 142). Emilia's husband kills her when she deviates away from her spousal obligations (Shakespeare 167). These portrayals of women as objectified properties and passive beings are demonstrations of a sexist social construct with deep historical roots that still affects modern society.

The historical context of *Othello* is based on early modern western society. The early modern period took place at the heels of the renaissance period. During this time, religion was the most powerful cultural entity in western society. It set the standards on western social construct. The status of women in society was founded on patriarchal and religious assumptions:

women were disposable (Othello and Iago disposes their wives for the sakes of reputation and success), bring forth children and service men. Women were used as dynastic pawns to secure familial alliances and were not groomed to be leaders in their own right. For instance, Henry VIII (1491-1547) married six different women and established Anglicanism in his quest to have a son. This was because of the sexist primogeniture laws based on the belief that males make more stable and secure leaders. Like Othello, Henry VIII lived in a time where a man's reputation is everything to him. As a king unable to produce princes, it besmirches his image and prominence in western society. Today in modern United Kingdom, males still take precedence in the succession act over female family members regardless of seniority. This is an example of how a historical context of a social construct affects modern cultural viewpoints.

Three-hundred years after *Othello* was published, the first wave of feminism gained mobilization. Marriage and motherhood were still the only available routes for most women at the turn of twentieth century. Before the suffrage movement, they were not allowed to vote or to formulate an opinion of their own. Educational resources during the first years of feminism resonated women's position in society. Homemaking prevailed in women's education even when massive industrialization was taking place in the major western cultures. Until the second wave of feminism in the sixties, only women of wealth had access to a competent education that encouraged critical thinking. This was mainly because most women were discouraged to think and act for their own selves. Women were expected to comply with the rules of a patriarchal society. Using *Othello* as a medium of comparison, history shows that nothing much has changed about the culture of sexism in the intervening years that have passed.

*Othello* is a direct depiction of a time when sexism is acceptable, and society openly lauds women as subservient. Women today are still grappling with the realities of sexism. Some,

like Desdemona and the women of the generation she embodies, still struggles with domestic abuse and objectification. Others fight for equal wages and reproductive rights. Unlike their predecessors, however, women now have the freedom to have their voices heard and cast ballots for their own good will. The move for women's rights and equality is still a highly controversial subject, but the movement will go on forward as social constructs evolve and make way for a more equal and just society.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. 2012. Amazon Digital Services, Inc. Kindle file.

