

Emilia Speaks Her Mind:  
*Othello*, IV.iii, 82-99<sup>1</sup>

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*Othello* is a play about a black man who marries a white woman, and then murders her out of unfounded jealousy. It is also the story of another dysfunctional marriage, that of Iago and Emilia—which also ends in the murder of the wife by her husband. And whereas Desdemona is a pathetic victim of circumstances, it is arguable that Emilia is the truly tragic female figure in this story: a more complex woman, whose death is brought about as much by her own inner conflicts of loyalty as by her psychopathic husband. Carol Thomas Neely suggested in 1985 that ‘Within *Othello* it is Emilia who most explicitly speaks to this theme [of marital love], recognizes this central conflict [between men and women], and inherits from the heroines of comedy the role of potential mediator of it.’<sup>2</sup> I will suggest in this commentary on Emilia’s speech ‘But I do think it is their husbands’ faults’ that her potentially comic role in the play fails because of an inability on the part of the on-stage listener—Desdemona—to hear an argument that subverts the conventions by which she conducts her life.

<sup>1</sup> Quotations are from the New Cambridge *Othello*, ed. Norman Sanders, 1984. Quotations from other Shakespeare plays are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 1997). I would like to express my gratitude to Sydney actress Caroline Brazier for sharing with me her experience of playing Emilia.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, ‘Women and Men in *Othello*’, from *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Yale University Press, 1985), repr. in *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare’s Othello*, ed. and intro. Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 81. Neely goes on to claim that ‘Emilia, though expert at noting and analyzing jealousy, seems untouched by it herself. Even her argument for the single standard is good-natured; it contains little hatred of men and no personal animosity towards Iago.’ (93) This comment is based on an implicit imagined embodiment of Emilia as an earthy, imperturbable type who would speak these lines with ‘good nature’; but as my brief survey of recent performances shows, this is by no means an inevitable reading.

To perform is to act, to embody. Who is Emilia, what are her characteristics? All that the play tells us of her is that she is Iago's wife, and she is therefore in the position of servant-companion to Desdemona. She and Iago appear to have no children, which may lead us to speculate about the health of their sex life (there was no reliable contraceptive method in the early seventeenth century). At various points in the play she indicates her desperate need to please her husband, or even gain his attention—most notably in the scene in which she picks up the handkerchief which Desdemona has dropped and says that she'll give it to her husband (III.iii, 294-301: 'My wayward husband hath a hundred times /Wooed me to steal it.... what he will do with it,/heaven knows, not I:/ I nothing but to please his fantasy.'). Traditionally, performances have embodied Emilia as not particularly genteel, blunt (even bawdy) in her speech and by implication in her feelings. Her age is usually set at over forty, to contrast her experience of men and the world with the youthful naivety of Desdemona. These are, however, easy choices for actress and director; they permit a generalised reading of the lines which inevitably will fail to do justice to the complexity of such a speech as that at the end of IV.iii. A considerably less homogeneous reading of these lines might arise from playing Emilia, for example, as black, or of another non-Venetian ethnicity—so that her marital situation would disturbingly echo and invert that of Othello and Desdemona. Or she might be aged no more than in her late twenties, an attractive and intelligent woman in her sexual prime—frustrated and embittered at the failure of her marriage. Or she might be post-menopausal and no longer sexually desiring. Choices such as these will colour the lines of the character, so that the speech can never be pinned down to a 'final' meaning as regards the play's major relationships.

To take a gamut of examples from recent filmed performances: the BBC's 1981 television version casts an obviously middle-aged Rosemary Leach as Emilia, her speech in IV.iii smiling, unworried, affectionate, rather like a worldly-wise aunt. Trevor Nunn, filming for television his 1989 Royal Shakespeare Company production, casts Zoë Wanamaker, a

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woman in her forties: she plays the speech in a sad and reflective mood—it is clear that she is talking as much to herself as to Desdemona, sadly recognising in Desdemona the first signs of the hurt that she herself has suffered in marriage. The most recent film, Oliver Parker's version of 1995 starring Lawrence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh, has the relatively unknown Anna Patrick playing Emilia as an intelligent and rather cynical woman in her early thirties: she has the measure of men and their double standard, but this knowledge is not something for bawdy laughter or weary tolerance. (It is interesting that these examples over a fifteen-year period show Emilias getting younger, thereby developing an image of potential sisterhood between Emilia and Desdemona which reflects the influence of feminist consciousness in the late twentieth century.)

All that readers can do in analysing this speech is to look at the structure of argument, the dramatic function, the resonances with other parts of the play (or other plays), so as to provide an imagined actor with tools to build her own interpretation of the role. We need also to be aware of the context of the speech. The 'Willow Song' scene is the only scene in the play in which Desdemona and Emilia are alone together on stage for more than a few seconds. It is a moment full of the potential for shared confidences, for speaking thoughts woman to woman, unhampered by the censoring presence of husbands or other men. Two scenes earlier, Othello has struck Desdemona, publicly, in the presence of the Duke's officials from Venice, calling her 'devil'. She has no comprehension of what has brought on this violent behaviour in Othello, and wants only to win back his good opinion. Through the Willow Song, she has assimilated herself to the literary trope of the innocent girl dying for the love of a false-hearted man: she sees herself as helpless victim. Into this somewhat maudlin atmosphere breaks Emilia's disquisition on the sexual double standard. It might be read as a last attempt by Emilia to save Desdemona from her self-destructive 'feminine' passivity. Tragically, it fails: these women's conversation, even when they are alone, cannot break

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down the walls of the glass prison into which Desdemona has willingly walked.

Emilia's speech is structured like that of a seasoned debater. Although she has not spoken with this force and cogency anywhere else in the play, we sense that she has been mulling over these thoughts for a long time. The constantly repeated phrase is 'I think'. She generalises from her own bitter experience, offering a 'hypothetical' to prove her case that

it is their husbands' faults  
If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,  
And pour our treasures into foreign laps....

The 'duty' of a husband to his wife, according to the Marriage Service, includes the 'worship' of her with his body: the act of lovemaking is of *worth*, fittingly represented by the metaphor of 'treasure', the husband's semen itself a quasi-sacramental gift which it is a *betrayal* to 'pour ... into foreign laps'. Other women's bodies are outside the bounds of marriage as a foreign country is to the commonwealth of the king and the country he guards and leads.

Moving away from metaphorical language, Emilia—though still apparently speaking generally about 'they' and 'us'—seems to be calling her own experience into play as she speaks of the 'peevisish jealousies' which we can deduce are part of her daily life with Iago (e.g. III.iv, 152-5, 'But jealous souls will not be answered so./They are not ever jealous for the cause, But jealous for they're jealous'); these now seem to be becoming evident in Othello. Or—another hypothetical,/but one which will surely disturb her listener with its truth—'say they strike us': Othello *has* just hit Desdemona. Or, again—Emilia's mind seems to circle obsessively back to Iago's basic failure of emotional generosity, his inability to love—they 'scant our former having in despite'. Annotators clarify this as a reference to the wife's pin-money being spitefully withheld, but Emilia's language is both vaguer and more suggestive than this: it speaks of loss—loss of a state of belonging to some greater entity: the happily married couple.

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The turning point of Emilia's rhetorical argument is

Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,  
Yet we have some revenge.

-This is what follows from the hypothetical but all too recognisable behaviour described in the previous five lines. Women's 'gall'—their spirit, their capacity to feel anger and resentment—is a natural human trait: the 'gall' or liver is one of the seats of the humours in medieval anatomy. But there is a subliminal pun here: 'gall' also means 'sore'. What follows from such husbands' behavior is women's wounds, like the sore produced by continual rubbing of a badly-structured saddle on a horse. Thus, women may be victims of a system which silences and controls them, but they are also human: they may be feminine and display 'grace' (both physical charm and spiritual beauty), but they are also entitled to claim the masculine right of revenge. Why? Because as well as being women, they have the bodies, the five senses, of all human beings:

Let husbands know  
Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,  
And have their palates both for sweet and sour  
As husbands have.

The binary division of the world into dominant male and submissive female is rhetorically defeated by this alternative model of equal experience *as bodies*.

The third movement of Emilia's forensic speech is structured on a set of rhetorical questions, designed to engage her audience's assent to the obvious rightness of the answers. (As in a courtroom, there is a double audience: the theatre audience is the 'jury', Desdemona the 'judge'; the actress may choose to address both.)

What is it that they do  
When they change us for others? Is it sport?  
I think it is.

Here the rhetorical force depends on a semantic switch via the fulcrum of 'sport': first, sexual pleasure (*OED* 'amorous

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dalliance or intercourse' —cf. II. i, 217, 'When the blood is made dull with the act of sport'); then a pastime, a meaningless game, which devalues the original relationship. 'And doth affection breed it?' again uses a telling ambiguity: its primary meaning is 'love'—that which should belong to the marital relationship. But paradoxically, it doesn't; the secondary meaning of 'desire' undermines the comfortable connotation of the first meaning. 'Is't frailty that thus errs?' she goes on to ask. Emilia's audience, then and now, will recognise that 'frailty' is normally associated with woman—most famously in Hamlet's opening soliloquy, 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' (*Hamlet*, I.ii, 146). But the reference here is clearly to the behavior of men.

Emilia winds up her speech by a process of inverted repetition: men's 'sport ... affection ... frailty' is echoed in a recognition of women's 'affection ... sport ... frailty'. The point is made: men and women are equally human in their desires: the characteristics which traditionally belong to one gender in the official discourse are demonstrably the qualities of both. It is an extraordinary recognition for an early seventeenth-century writer; it has a pre-echo in a play of a decade earlier, *The Merchant of Venice*, when Shylock asks, 'Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?' (III.i, 59-64). The two sides of the binary may be based on ethnicity here, but the rhetorical point is the same: the very fact that we have bodies, we *are* bodies, creates the right to a recognition of equality despite a hierarchical social structure.

Like all good debating speeches, Emilia's ends with a resounding conclusion, reinforced by the rhyme which Shakespeare in his mature plays saves for the endings of scenes or significant moments:

Then let them use us well: else let them know,  
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

This couplet contains a clever utilisation of the *actual* hierarchical state of things between men and women: as well as

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being expected to behave properly by women ('let them use us well'), men do indeed have the 'use' of women. But, Emilia warns, with power comes responsibility: if men are constructed as morally superior to women, their leaders and teachers, then they must expect their examples to be followed, even if this will produce behaviour which they don't like.

Emilia may be putting on a brave front in this powerful performance, drawing as she apparently does on the well of bitterness created by her own marriage. The repetition of 'I think' throughout the speech not only serves a rhetorical purpose but also indicates her obsessive reflection, alone in a marriage which has failed even to provide companionship. In this speech, spurred on by the near-despair of seeing Desdemona about to enter the same dark paths, she tries to create a 'we' that is herself and Desdemona, representative of the class of all women. But Desdemona can't hear her; she doesn't respond to the clarion call for sisterhood but retreats to the victim position of blaming herself. She adds her own couplet to close the scene, preferring to interiorise the problem with a sigh:

Good night, good night. God me such usage send,  
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!

Within two scenes, she is dying, saying in answer to Emilia's appalled question 'O who hath done this deed?', 'Nobody: I myself, farewell.'

Emilia's contribution to the play's last scene is an unceasing attempt to 'speak', to tell the truth, to make clear just how monstrous a liar Iago is. It is this final determination to speak which leads to her death at the hands of her husband: 'so speaking as I think, alas, I die' (V.ii, 249). In her speech at the end of the 'Willow Song' scene, and in her passionate truth-telling in the final scene, Emilia presents an image of 'woman' which is the transgressive opposite of the official ideal as voiced by another representative of patriarchy, King Lear, over his dead daughter: 'Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low; an

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excellent thing in woman' (V.iii, 273-4). But neither speech nor silence can save the women of *Othello*.

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