

## Worksheet 16 – Act 4, Scene 1: Eavesdropping

### Review: Lecture 15

In the last lecture, Prof. John McRae explored the symbolism of the handkerchief in the play.

- ✓ Where did Othello get the handkerchief from that he gave to Desdemona?

### Recall: Lecture 16

**Complete this section after watching the video lecture to check how much you remember.**

1. How does Iago use Bianca to trick Othello?
  - a) By getting her to make a copy of Desdemona's handkerchief, so that Othello sees Cassio using it
  - b) By having her tell Othello she saw Desdemona with Cassio, so Othello no longer trusts Desdemona
  - c) By having Othello overhear her and Cassio together, so that he thinks Cassio is with Desdemona
2. Lodovico brings Othello a letter from Venice. What news does it contain?
  - a) Reports of a rumour that Desdemona is having an affair
  - b) Orders for Othello to return to Venice, leaving Cassio in charge
  - c) News that the Turkish army is going to attempt to invade Cyprus again
3. What does Othello do to Desdemona in this scene that shocks Lodovico?
  - a) Hits her
  - b) Calls her a devil
  - c) Ignores her

### Analysis

4. Prof. McRae describes Iago as "Machiavellian", a term used to describe someone who gains power through cunning and manipulation. Niccolò Machiavelli was an Italian Renaissance politician, who wrote a book called *The Prince* (1513), which offered advice on how to be a strong leader.

For each of the quotations from *The Prince*, below, explain how Iago might be an example of Machiavellian leadership:

- a) 'Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are.'
- b) 'Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception.'
- c) 'It is much safer to be feared than loved because ...love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.'

Challenge: Read some extracts from *The Prince* which is available to read free online:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1232/1232-h/1232-h.htm>

5. In this section of the play we are introduced to a new character, Bianca, who is described as a 'courtesan':
  - a) Do some online research on the roles of courtesans in Venetian society. What is Bianca's social position in the play?

- b) Why is Bianca an important figure in the play? How does she contrast to Emilia and Desdemona?

### Evaluation

6. In this section of the play, some of the male characters' sexism and cruelty towards women becomes clear. Read the two examples of feminist criticism below. For each one:
- Summarise their key point in your own words.
  - Explain to what extent you agree with their arguments, based on the events in Act 4, Scene 1.

**Prof. Farah Karim-Cooper**, <http://2015.playingshakespeare.org/women-in-othello>

Shakespeare is suggesting that women do not fit easily into the categories created by Renaissance patriarchy, that they are human, and changeable and sometimes more noble and honourable, regardless of their sexual behaviour, than the men who try to control them

**Prof. Virginia Mason Vaughan**, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/critical-approaches-to-othello>

From the play's earliest performances, audiences responded sympathetically to Desdemona's plight. After a 1610 production at Oxford, Henry Jackson recalled that Desdemona 'entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance'. That changed in the late 20th century, however, when feminist critics underscored Desdemona's initial independence and Emilia's eventual strength, and outlined the ways both women – as well as the courtesan Bianca – were constrained by the male characters' patriarchal suppositions. From a feminist perspective, early modern England's preoccupation with cuckoldry demonstrates a basic male insecurity about women's sexuality.

### Glossary

- **Fomenting** – to stir up something unpleasant.
- **Incarnate** – in the flesh.  
*e.g. Some people believe that dictator Joseph Stalin was like the devil incarnate.*
- **Scheming** – making secret plans.
- **Machiavellian** – cunning and scheming, especially in politics.
- **Credulous** – being too ready to believe things.
- **Whoring** – doing sex work.