

Worksheet 18 – Act 4, Scene 3: Desdemona and Emilia

Review: Lecture 17

- ✓ What does the word 'shambles' mean? In what context does Othello use this word when describing Desdemona in Act 4, Scene 2?

Recall: Lecture 18

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

1. Complete the missing words from the quotation below:

Desdemona

So would not I. my love doth so _____ him,
That even his stubbornness, his cheques, his _____ —
Prithee, unpin me, — have _____ and _____ in them.

Analysis

2. Watch the video of a section of Act 4, Scene 3 from a 2018 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Othello*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMcKXq2W6bk>
 - a) What is the nature of the relationship between Emilia and Desdemona?
 - b) What is the effect of having an extended scene between these two women alone?
3. Read Emilia's speech about marriage (below). What arguments does Emilia make about the nature of revenge and infidelity? How does her attitude to marriage differ from Desdemona's?

Emilia

But I do think it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite;
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. 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. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?
I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too: and have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

Evaluation

4. What is the significance Desdemona's song in this scene? How does it connect to the musical imagery used in other sections of the play?

Hint: consider the quotations below from the rest of the play in your answer.

- **Iago:** 'O, you are well tuned now! / But I'll set down the pegs that make this music, / As honest as I am' (Act 2, Scene 1).
- **Othello:** 'Tis not to make me jealous / To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company, / Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well; / Where virtue is, these are more virtuous' (Act 3, Scene 3)
- **Desdemona:** 'My advocacy is not now in tune; / My lord is not my lord' (Act 3, Scene 4)

Extension: you can watch a modern reconstruction of Desdemona's song online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQtOfHBaNqM>

5. As Prof. McRae discusses, when it was first performed, Emilia's speech would have been spoken by a boy dressed as a woman, as women weren't permitted to act on stage in 1604. How might this change how the audience reacted to the message in Emilia's speech?
6. Prof. McRae describes Emilia's speech as a 'manifesto for women'. Based on your reading of *Othello*, write your own manifesto about the treatment of women. *You should reference events and quotations from the play in your writing.*

Glossary

- **Manifesto** – a public declaration of policy and aims, especially one issued by a political party or group to state their key goals.
- **Galls** – the contents of an animal's gall bladder, associated in the Renaissance with feelings of bitterness.