

Worksheet 20 – Act 5, Scene 2: Othello kills Desdemona

Review: Lecture 19

In Lecture 19, Prof. McRae examined Act 5, Scene 1, where Cassio is injured and Roderigo is killed by Iago.

- ✓ In Act 5, Scene 1, what insulting term does Emilia call Bianca?

Recall: Lecture 20

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

1. Fill in the missing words from Othello's line:

Othello

Then murder's out of _____, and sweet revenge grows _____.

Analysis

2. Reread Othello's speech on seeing Desdemona asleep and answer the questions below:

Othello

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!—
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood;
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me: but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd the rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again.
It must needs wither: I'll smell it on the tree.

[Kissing her]

Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. *[Kisses her again]* One more, and this the last:
So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears: this sorrow's heavenly;
It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.

- a) When Othello comes to kill Desdemona, he describes her with beautiful imagery, such as her skin being as white as 'snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster'. Why does Othello describe Desdemona in this way?
- b) What is the significance of Othello's repeated references to light?
- c) What three justifications does Othello give to for killing Desdemona?

3. When Emilia asks Desdemona who has killed her, Desdemona answers 'Nobody; I myself. Farewell/ Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!'. What does Desdemona mean by this line? Why does she say it?
4. Prof. McRae discusses how Emilia plays a large role in this scene, standing up to Iago with her repeated refusals to remain silent: 'but not now'... 'I will not'. What is the effect of Emilia playing such an important role in this scene after Desdemona is killed?

Evaluation

5. In the Renaissance there weren't the same fixed divisions between the public and private spheres, with historian Richard Mackenney describing Venetian society in the Renaissance as often operating in the 'semi-public', a place where personal, political, and economic spheres are all combined (Mackenney, 1998). This blending of public and private can be seen in the kinds of bedrooms wealthy people would have in Venice in the 1600s:



Birth of the Virgin by Vittore Carpaccio, c. 1506 (Wikipedia, public domain)

- a) How many people can you see in this image of a Renaissance bedroom? Is there anything that surprises you about the image?
- b) Why is it significant that Shakespeare chooses to have Othello kill Desdemona in her bed? What effect does this have on the audience?

c) How does Act 5, Scene 2 connect to the tension between public and private in the rest of the play?

Glossary

- **Alabaster** – a white marble from which statues are made.
- **Minister** – a servant.
- **Cunning'st** – cleverest
- **Promethean** – life-giving (coming from the Greek legend of Prometheus, the god who create the first human from clay and brought it to life)
- **Relume** – relight; reignite.
- **Balmy** - delicately fragrant.