

27 May 2020

Othello

Act 3, scene 4

Overview

- The role of women in the tragedy
- The significance of the handkerchief
- The consequence of Emilia's dishonesty
- The ripple effect of Iago's deceit and deliberate lies
- Othello's downward spiral from nobility and valour to an abusive husband

Scene 4

The opening lines in this scene focus on **lies and deception**. The clown emphasises that men, especially soldiers, should have integrity: "He's a soldier, and for one to say a soldier lies, is stabbing." L4. The clown may be responding to a question about Cassio, but he might as well be speaking about Iago, who is also a soldier. While the clown's pun is a temporary source of humour, Iago's two-faced nature and outward "flag and sign of love" have transformed Othello into a vengeful "monster".

Emilia's lie, in response to Desdemona's question about a "trifle", the handkerchief, will have a huge impact on the course of Desdemona's life. Emilia knows how important the handkerchief is to Desdemona.

Desdemona is naïve, kind and lacks the will to believe in the ugliness of humans, especially those from her "clime". Brabantio had shielded her from this. She appears to have little understanding of people's ability to deceive or of the nature of jealousy, and despite Emilia's knowledge of men Desdemona continues to trust Othello: "My noble Moor is true of mind and made of no such baseness as jealous creatures are." L22. Desdemona is unable to reflect on the sudden change in Othello, and to consider what gave her the courage to elope with Othello, things that would make her realise that human nature can be fickle. She does not understand Othello's sexual undertones when he holds her hand – L44.

TASK 1

The lost handkerchief is significant to Othello, since it was a gift from his mother. Read lines 52 to 71, “That’s a fault...maidens’ hearts.” In your own words explain the significance of the handkerchief.

Othello’s anger is clearly evident from his tone and body language at this point – L75. It is difficult to accept that Desdemona ignores this, and her description of Cassio as “a more sufficient man” – L86 provokes the deceived Othello even further. Desdemona does not even heed Emilia’s warning about jealousy. Emilia’s view of men stems from her knowledge of Venetian society (Brabantio had shielded Desdemona from the world), and her experience in marriage. Desdemona’s weakness is her lack of wisdom in “human dealings”, which makes Iago’s exploitation of her all the more reprehensible. He stands in contrast to the loving and “divine” Desdemona. At this point Othello’s assessment of Iago as a fellow who “knows all qualities, with a learned spirit of human dealings” – Act 3, scene 3, line 261, is apt. Iago has skilfully turned Desdemona’s “virtue into pitch” -Act 2, scene 3, Line 338.

Desdemona accepts Othello’s anger towards her as a projection of something concerning his work. She feels that the handkerchief assumed such importance because Othello is preoccupied with greater things – Lines 134 to 139. She decides that she has misjudged Othello, by expecting him to be as attentive as he had been on their wedding night. She understands that men are not gods. Desdemona is willing to accept Othello’s harsh treatment, when his behaviour is clearly unacceptable. Even if he was bothered by work, she cannot see that his attitude is wrong.

Emilia believes that jealousy is an innate quality; it doesn’t need a reason to manifest: “But jealous souls will not be answered so. They are not ever jealous for the cause, but jealous for they are jealous. ‘Tis a monster begot upon itself, born on itself.” Lines 153-156. If we consider her statement, we cannot blame Iago for Othello’s jealousy and anger. **Emilia suggests that if the potential for jealousy exists, jealousy will surface and needs no justification.**

TASK 2

Do you agree with Emilia? Can we blame Iago for Othello's actions at this point in the play? Write a short paragraph in which you express your opinion.