

Emilia's voice: Shakespeare's take on feminism in *Othello*

Karen Danielle Lima Rodrigues¹

Abstract: Shakespeare's female representation and the way his female roles are portrayed and interpreted have ignited the curiosity and admiration of many scholars. The article, therefore, intends to discourse on the important role Emilia holds in the play *Othello*. How does her secondary role bring such significance to the play? What voice does she have? Who is, in fact, Emilia? Although many centuries have passed since the publication and original enactment of this play, Emilia's role brings forth many interesting debates that are pertinent to our present society.

Keywords: Emilia; Feminism; Shakespeare.

Resumo: A representação feminina em Shakespeare e a forma com que seus papéis femininos são representados e interpretados sempre provocaram a curiosidade e a admiração de muitos estudiosos. Deste modo, este artigo busca discutir sobre a importância do papel de Emília em *Othello*. Como seu papel secundário traz um grande significado para a peça? Que voz a personagem tem? Quem, de fato, é Emília? Embora muitos séculos tenham se passado desde a publicação e a encenação original da peça, o papel de Emília ocasiona muitos debates interessantes, pertinentes à sociedade contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Emília; feminismo; Shakespeare.

¹ Acadêmica do curso de Letras – Português e Inglês pela Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso, campus de Pontes e Lacerda. / English and Portuguese student at the State University of Mato Grosso. E-mail: karodrigues2507@gmail.com.

Introduction

The social roles for both men and women have often been pre-established in the Early Modern days. It is possible to see evident criticism reasoned in these assumptions. One more than respectable example would be Shakespeare and his many polemic and marvelous plays. He has long been known for his feminist perspectives on his female characters and their role in society. More often than not, this ideological debate has brought forth much controversy.

The present article aims to elucidate the role played by Emilia in Shakespeare's Othello. Like many of his female characters, Emilia displays great intelligence, energy and a very strong sense of personal independence. In those times, these traits were not well looked upon in society. Shakespeare's works were written during the Elizabethan era and were based on the society of that time. In those days, women were treated as mere sociable creatures. Only to be seen but not heard. Their opinions were obsolete and mostly discarded. Therefore, the purpose is to show how Emilia's role in Othello contradicts this paradigm.

The female role in society

With knowledge comes power, therefore, women of knowledge pose a threat to the patriarchal society. The female role in society has been constantly changing. Today, the rights women have do not even compare to those of the women centuries ago. During the 17th century, for example, the education women received was restricted to such a point where their social and economic lives were limited, a way to ensure a less competitive work environment for men.

The female relations in society have always been filled with conflicting situations as a result to partaking in a society ruled by the opposite gender. Even the research about these roles and relations have been lost over time or is obscure for history, through many centuries, has been written, analyzed and observed through the male mindset. The interests are often misleading as they differ from the arguments from the female gender.

According to Elenilce Sartori (2014), women weren't always relegated to secondary roles in society. There was a period in time when society lived essentially off what was produced and collected by the hand of both men and women. The work was, therefore, divided equally. The men were in charge of the hunt and women in charge of the family's agricultural produce. There was no hierarchy system in this society. It is also important to

point out that, during this period in time, men did not have knowledge on the human reproductive system. They believed that the women would only bear children due to the gods. However, they soon began to understand their role in reproduction. It is after this knowledge acquisition that the marriage system we know today is put into place.

After this, the male activities began to bear much more importance than those of women. The ones responsible for running the community began to accumulate power and the work division turned ones more important than others. Due to this division, some began to own more than others do and to protect all they owned, the men began to ensure that their children would only be blood related in order to continue the family heir and protect all they owned. With all of these changes, women who before did not have to worry as to whom was their child's father now see themselves attached to a man (like property) for the sole purpose of guaranteeing lineage. That is when society, who was once matriarchal, became a patriarchal society, ruled by men.

Sartori also says that after the institution of the patriarchal society, women lost their social space in the sense of being equals to men. Her space is limited to the house, taking care of the family. The public life, as well as the politics, economy and judiciary life, belonged to the male. So, the female role has been one of secondary importance for a very long time. The limited access to education, political involvement, careers. Consequently, in literature, that is not different. The reasons behind why women are relegated to a secondary role are complex, yes, but based on the patriarchal society that has been in place for an abundant number of many centuries. The attitudes, therefore, are originated within the society's culture. Attitudes that can be seen in art, literature, and many other aspects. If we think about the idea of theatrical plays, for example, they are false or aesthetic creations but society's reflections nonetheless. They attain an essence from the reality of social life; they act as a social document. The amount of female writers were very few. Education was meant, initially only for men. Therefore, when female schools were created, they offered an education based on household works: learning needlework, embroidery, and things of this sort. Actually, what if they had the same education as men? They sure would not be able to find the time, among all of their designated chores, to write and if that was not the problem, then privacy certainly was.

In England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603), women were able to relish in some form of liberty, being able to own lands, be the head of their households and have careers. Even though this was true, the patriarchal system was still in place. The women were also allowed, during the queen's reign, to partake in theatrical performances. During

these few moments of freedom, they could yearn and be yearned. Look and be looked at. The theater offered the possibility to “buy” their place in society, to have a taste of independence not found in other aspects of the social life. Yet these possibilities threatened the control men needed to have over women. Even though the theatre offered these women some sort of freedom and independence, they were still a constant threat and worry to the male public.

Shakespearean women

Born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon in 16th century England, Shakespeare is by far one of the most researched and read poet and playwright of all time. He was a poet ahead of his time and his plays are witness to this. In a time of traditionalism and will to live by it, Shakespeare did not have eyes for the common, the traditional. To him the uncommon, untraditional was something of a challenge. It offered something new and exciting. The author Agnes Heller describes Shakespeare’

In the history plays, the question of what is natural revolves first around the conflict between the right of nature and the inherited rights; but Shakespeare never stops at this level. Whenever the question of the right of nature is raised, the question “What is human nature?” must also be raised. The foundations of the other right (what legitimacy means, what tradition is) can be known, or at least explored and deciphered. So can the ways to live up to the obligations resulting from traditional rights. In Shakespeare’s moral code, living up to the obligations that follow from traditional rights boils down to maintaining and defending one’s honour (HELLER, 2002, p. 22).

In other words, the question of what is natural is conflicted between natural rights and the inherited rights. However, Shakespeare is no prisoner to this conflict. In his code of law, live up to obligations of traditional law is synthesized to the maintenance e defense of your own honor. Even though the will to live by tradition was a conviction of his time, he forever challenged that notion. He often questioned, if we deconstruct tradition, what is left? What is under it? What is, in fact, human nature? What are natural rights and “laws of nature”? In his works, Shakespeare confronts these questions, he finds himself confronted by the essence of human nature and how it is obscured by darkness. Heller also adds:

Shakespeare lights some spots in this darkness. He explores the extremes. He knows that for men and women everything is possible, that all “combinations” are options, that there are perhaps no limits. Or are there limits? I think that there are and that Shakespeare will make us turn back to face those limits again and again. Shakespeare confronts honesty with honor;

honesty is a matter of conscience, of obeying the call of conscience. But what is the content of conscience? What does *conscience* know? And how does it know what it knows? (HELLER, 2002, p.22)

Heller calls this shock between the two mindsets (natural rights and traditional law) a *duplo vínculo* which means double link. This double link can not be analyzed or interpreted ethically, nor can it be subordinate to one or the other concept. In Shakespeare, his protagonists are intriguing mostly because they cannot decide between one or the other (the two laws or the concepts of what is natural). In Hamlet's case, he chooses both, he cannot decide between either one, and for that reason he is stuck in a double link, which nearly tears him apart. Heller also explains that there is quite a difference between choosing inherited rights or the natural law. Tradition offers less space for something new to be done or to reinvent your own character. A purely traditional man, be him good or bad, will not be seen in important roles in Shakespeare's plays.

Continuing on the concept of the double link is where his female roles come into place. There are two natural concepts: one that is the concept of natural as the notions relative to the natural law and the other, which is the concept that identifies with the nature of tradition. When we think of the second concept, it is only natural that daughters obey their parents right? But when we look at Juliet and Desdemona, for instance, they disobeyed. They took charge of their destiny, denying to obey their parents' wishes and doing what was right for them, unlike Ophelia who behaved herself according to the nature of tradition, Shakespeare created female characters like Juliet who defy the natural order of its society, the traditional way. In a time where women had no say over their body and whom they chose to marry, here are these characters taking matters into their own hands. Emilia is no different.

The importance of Emilia's role

“To perform is to act, to embody.
Who is Emilia, what are her characteristics?”
(GAY, s/d, p.2)

Othello is a play based on envy and jealousy, as well as betrayal. It tells a story of a black man that marries a white woman named Desdemona, who he murders out of unfounded jealousy. But the real dysfunctional marriage we intend to analyze is that of Iago and Emilia. A tragic end no different than that of Desdemona and Othello. Although she is placed as a secondary character in the play, there many reasons to believe that Emilia is truly a tragic female figure in this play. A woman with such complexity who battles between her inner

conflicts and the loyalty she feels towards her psychopathic husband. Her sole purpose in the play is to be the servant companion of Othello's wife. Her marriage does not seem very successful. With no children of their own, it is possible to believe that Iago and Emilia do not have a very healthy sex life as there were no reliable anti-contraceptives in those days). The true terms of the relationship, her appearance or age are uncertain. This uncertainty makes it difficult to obtain a final meaning to her and Iago's marriage. According to Penny Gay in her article about Emilia she says that:

[...] 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." (s/d, p.2)

At various moments during the play, she indicates the violent need she has to please Iago, and how badly she desires his attention. This only collaborates with the idea of an unsuccessful marriage. This need for attention can be exemplified from a scene in the play where she steals Desdemona's handkerchief at Iago's order:

I am glad I have found this napkin: This was her first remembrance from the Moor: My wayward husband hath a hundred times Woo'd me to steal it; but she so loves the token, For he conjured⁸⁵ her she should ever keep it, That she reserves it evermore about her To kiss and talk to. I'll have the work ta'en out, And give't Iago: what he will do with it Heaven knows, not I; I nothing but⁸⁸ to please his fantasy. (Act III, scene iii, p.109)

Megg Ward (2015) says that "Emilia represents knowledge in *Othello* which could very well be called an epistemological tragedy" (p.5). She also adds that the play becomes tragic when the protagonist begins to doubt the one thing she should be most certain of: his wife's love and fidelity. Emilia is the sole survivor of this incident, it is she knew all of the facts and narrated them after the tragic deaths. She is an observer. All that happens in Desdemona's life she knows, she is always the one asked to play messenger and "run and tell" all that has happened. She is, therefore, the vehicle of knowledge in the play.

All of this having been said, the key point is to discourse about the way she breaks away from the nature of traditional ways. Unlike most women of her time, she is not in complete submission to her husband all throughout the play. Her thoughts become more and more uneasy and as she gives advice to Desdemona, it is hard to distinguish if she is speaking about her maiden's situation or of her own martial issues.

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man: They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; They eat us hungrily, and when they are full, They belch us. (ACT III, p.127)

But jealous souls will not be answer'd so; They are not ever jealous for the cause, But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster Begot upon itself, born on itself. (ACT III, p.129)

These two lines show how critical and introspective her speeches are becoming. As she gives advice de Desdemona, you can see how she speaks not only of her maiden's issues, but as if she were going through the same ones. When she says that "all men are stomachs" and that "they belch us" when they are full can be linked to the way her own husband treats her after she handed him handkerchief, for he treated her more like a servant than a wife, no kindness and love in his voice.

Later on there is a monologue where she criticizes the husband's saying that if a man did not fulfill his marital duties (sex) than he should not be surprised if his wife were to wander into foreign laps in order to be satisfied. For a woman of the seventeenth century, this is very uncharacteristic, for in this period women are expected to be quiet, obeying humans, who do not voice their secret desires or opinions.

Yes, a dozen; and as many to the vantage as would store the world they played for. 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 sense³¹ 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. (ACT IV, p.175)

Going against her husband, Emilia as she sees that Othello has killed her mistress she releases all the knowledge she has. Telling the truth, reporting the lies of her husband, she is killed. In this moment, opposite of what is expected for a lady, she stands before many men and speaks her mind.

O thou dull Moor! That handkerchief thou speak'st of I found by fortune and did give my husband; For often, with a solemn earnestness, More than indeed belong'd to such a trifle, He begg'd of me to steal it. / What did thy song bode, lady? Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan, And die in

music. [Singing] “Willow, willow, willow,”— Moor, she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor; So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true; So speaking as I think, I die, I die (ACT V,scene.ii, p.203)

Ultimately, Emilia held the knowledge to undo all of Iago’s schemes and treachery. Although she spoke the truth to Othello before he committed murder, he chose not to believe her. At last, having spoken the truth of all that was muddied by her husband’s whispers, Iago’s own plans fail, for he did not acknowledge the depth of his wife’s character. Emilia is truly the tragic hero of this story. Her weakness is the faith she had in her husband. Even though she possessed all the knowledge to suspect him, she preferred not to until there was no other way. When realizing that her actions and omissions resulted in Desdemona’s death, she reveals all. This heroic act defines the climax of the play. Knowing the end she would face she reported the lies anyway.

Conclusion

The role of Emilia is so understated by the popular mindset that she rarely is remembered in the story. However, once more, her role is fundamental to the actions that take place in the play. She is the perfect example of the way Shakespeare viewed the “traditional” laws of society. He realized that women have always been put at a disadvantage position in all aspects of society: be it social, economic or political. And by creating characters such as Emilia, he gives women a voice. He offers an understanding point of view of life with the same emphasis on men and women. By portraying women such as Emilia, or Juliet, with strong and admirable traits, it is safe to say that he was one of the pioneers of the feminist movement. Men and women should be treated as equals in all departments: literature included.

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