

Notes

"I nothing know": Emilia's Rhetoric of Self-Resistance in *Othello*

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ABSTRACT

There can be little doubt that by filching Desdemona's handkerchief Emilia catalyzes her husband's actions against Othello. To be sure, the handkerchief supplies Iago with the ocular proof he needs to convince the Moor of Desdemona's infidelity. However, there remains the question of how much, if any, moral responsibility is to be attributed to Emilia for her complicity in Iago's plot. Critics concur that the question of why Emilia both lies directly to Desdemona and then neglects to speak up even when Othello angrily confronts his wife about the whereabouts of the handkerchief is a deeply problematic one. However, even a cursory glance at the literature points to a critical divide about the answer to this question.

Although I agree with Carole Thomas Neely that Emilia is prey to the dominant ideology of wifely virtue, I do not believe that it is either her conception of duty or her desire to act in accord with this ideology that compels her to lie. As the willow scene makes clear, Emilia recognizes the degree to which women's pre-ordained social roles both consign them to suffer and restrict their freedom to act, and to a certain extent, she accepts her social role. But she does not identify with it, that is, she does not buy into it, and for the right price, she would defy it. Indeed, it is freedom, not necessity, which initiates Emilia's lies, both to herself and to Desdemona. She lies to Desdemona because she has chosen to live in denial of a truth which she cannot acknowledge: that she had the choice to act otherwise, and now, this denial has become the truth in which she lives.

1

To focus on character analysis has long been out of fashion, but in what follows that is precisely my focus. The traditional conception of character to which most contemporary Shakespearean critics object is A.C. Bradley's:

What we do feel strongly, as a tragedy advances to its close, is that the calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men, and that the main source of these deeds is character. The dictum that, with Shakespeare, ‘character is destiny’ is no doubt an exaggeration, and one that may mislead (for many of his tragic personages, if they had not met with peculiar circumstances, would have escaped a tragic end, and might even have lived fairly untroubled lives); but it is an exaggeration of a vital truth. (Bradley 2001:29-30)

Bradley’s positing of character as a single, stable, cohesive ego is alien to a modern sensibility, but even more alien is his notion of character as autonomous from text. He writes as if character exists separately from the language of which it is an effect. Nonetheless, there are critics, most notably Harold Bloom, for whom Bradley’s view still holds sway. Terence Hawkes (2001:27) characterizes such Bradleyan criticism as “treating the characters in the plays as intimately accessible, real people, with lots of comfily discussable problems, neatly dissectible feelings, and eminently siftable thoughts coursing through readily penetrable minds”. Such psychologizing results in a transhistorical, transcultural interpretation of character which Hawkes finds irresponsible, for it neglects the role that social and cultural forces play in shaping dramatic identity.

The role which social forces play in shaping personal identity, and by extension, dramatic identity, became a focus of early New Historicism. Although most New Historicists, including Stephen Greenblatt himself, would no longer agree with his assertion that the self, and thereby character, is solely “the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society” (256), many still focus on the ways in which social forces —norms, conventions, practices, etc.— constrain human agency, thereby limiting the development of personal and dramatic identity. For these critics, character is always historically contingent and socially constructed.

In my view, however, such substituting of sociology for psychology —of social forces for psyche— merely imitates current beliefs about the springs of human conduct and serves only to license often ill-informed speculation about it. In other words, neither psychology nor sociology alone does justice to literature. For even if we agree to substitute the notion of “self as cultural text” (Desmet 1992:3) for Bradley’s cohesive, stable ego, we must still attend to the language Shakespeare uses to construct his *dramatis personae*.

In *Reading Shakespeare’s Characters*, Christy Desmet notes that characters are not solely effects of language but users of it. “What happens,” she asks, “when we listen to rather than look at Ophelia? What happens

when we perceive her as using language rather than being constructed by it?” (Desmet 1992:11).

In what follows, I ask the same questions of Emilia. What happens when we listen to rather than look at Emilia? What happens when we perceive her as using language rather than as being constructed by it? However, while Desmet’s answers to her questions are shaped by her effort “to generate a rhetoric of Shakespearean character” (Desmet 1992:3), my study of Emilia is not so shaped. It is, rather, a preliminary study.

2

The central conflict in *Othello* is between husbands and wives. Othello maligns Desdemona because he believes that she has been unfaithful to him, but he makes no good-faith effort to determine whether his belief is true. Although he demands ocular proof from Iago, he rushes to judgment before any such proof is produced. Once Othello has allowed the thought of jealousy to darken his imagination, the integrity of his relationship with Desdemona is ruined. Likewise, for Iago, the mere suspicion that Emilia has been unfaithful to him is sufficient reason for his maligning her. Each man allows the vehemence of his passions, and here I conceive of Iago’s will to power as his passion, to determine his course of action, and each man rashly shifts from epistemic doubt about his wife’s unfaithfulness to ontological certainty about it. On the contrary, what marks both Desdemona’s and Emilia’s responses to their husbands is their reticence to believe that their husbands are capable of acting with malice toward them. Desdemona resists thinking that Othello might be jealous or think her unfaithful. Emilia is reluctant to acknowledge her suspicions about Iago’s intentions. Indeed, each woman is so measured in her response to her husband’s malignance that she fails to prevent her own destruction at her husband’s hands.

There can be little doubt that by filching Desdemona’s handkerchief Emilia catalyzes her husband’s actions against Othello. To be sure, the handkerchief supplies Iago with the ocular proof he needs to convince the Moor of Desdemona’s infidelity. However, there remains the question of how much, if any, moral responsibility is to be attributed to Emilia for her complicity in Iago’s plot. To appropriate a line of Harry Berger’s, what does Emilia know, and when does she know it?

When Emilia picks up the handkerchief which Desdemona has dropped only moments before, she knows that Iago is anxious to obtain it, but she is not fully candid with herself about the reasons for his wanting it.

She immediately weighs her own desire to please Iago against her knowledge of the import the handkerchief holds for Desdemona:

I am glad I have found this napkin,
 This was her first remembrance from the Moor
 My wayward husband hath a hundred times
 Wooed me to steal it, but she so loves the token,
 —For he conjured her she should ever keep it—
 That she reserves it evermore about her
 To kiss, and talk to.
 (3.3. 294-300)

That Emilia claims to be “glad” to have found the handkerchief is striking, for many people would be displeased at finding it since doing so would create for them a moral dilemma. However, Emilia is “glad”, for finding the handkerchief provides her an opportunity to pursue her own interests without having to engage in a clear case of thievery. She positions herself as merely the passive recipient of the handkerchief, yet having found it, she is, of course, morally bound to return it to its rightful owner. Failing to do so, and indeed, giving the handkerchief to Iago, whose intentions she here acknowledges to be “wayward”, would make her complicit in his plan.

The preponderance of pronouns in her utterance contributes to the distance Emilia must effect in order not to implicate herself in Iago’s actions. In the deliberative part of her speech, she refers to no one by name: Othello is referred to metonymically as “the Moor” and once by the third person pronoun “he”; Desdemona is referred to only by the third person pronouns “she” and “her”, and Iago only as “my wayward husband”. Such depersonalization makes it easier for her to make the decision to give the handkerchief to Iago. It is only after she has committed to giving Iago the handkerchief that she mentions his name.

Emilia refers to the handkerchief itself as a “token”, and both this word and the object it denotes are rich in significance. As the Oxford English Dictionary makes clear, the nominal sense of the word not only means “[a] keepsake or present given especially at parting”, but it also means “[a] sign or mark indicating some quality, or distinguishing one object from others”; “[s]omething serving as proof of a fact or statement”; and “[s]omething remaining as evidence of what formally existed”. All of these senses are at play in *Othello*.

Emilia understands the handkerchief to have been given to Desdemona as a symbol of Othello’s love, but it is also a symbol for Othello of Desdemona’s distinction and of his authority over her sexuality. Although

"—For he conjured her she should ever keep it—" is logically unambiguous—"For" clearly identifies what follows it as a reason for Desdemona to love the token—it is, however, semantically ambiguous. The handkerchief as "token" is a symbol of Othello's love for Desdemona, and it makes sense to understand "he conjured her to keep it" as meaning that Othello implored Desdemona to keep it near her to remind herself of his love. But this "token" might also serve as a symbol for the vestige of Othello's sexual power: he earlier refers to "the young affects / In [him] defunct" (1.3.264-5), and it makes as much sense to understand "conjured" to mean that Othello either deceived Desdemona about his sexual capability, and, or deceived her into thinking that "she should ever keep it", *i.e.*, that she should keep her virginity intact.

Although Emilia acknowledges the symbolic sexual import Desdemona attributes to the handkerchief, "she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss, and talk to", she, too, displaces its significance by investing the token with her own unconscious erotic desire. Her words associate Iago's 'wooing' with Othello's 'conjuring', thereby investing Iago's desire for the handkerchief with his potential desire for her. It might seem more apt for Emilia to say that Iago 'conjured', that is, 'entreated' her, to steal the handkerchief than that he 'wooed' her to do so, for we've no evidence of such playfulness toward Emilia on Iago's part. But we do know that Emilia is sexually desirous (she makes this known in her final scene with Desdemona), and according to Iago, she is sexually aggressive (he speaks to Cassio of her sexual advances). But 'conjured' also carried with it the now obsolete sense of 'to conspire', and this is precisely the act in which Emilia cannot acknowledge engaging, so Emilia posits Iago as wooing her, and she as having resisted his attempts to seduce her.

Now Emilia must choose what, if anything, to do with the handkerchief. She resolves to give it to Iago, but she claims not to know what he'll do with it:

I'll ha' the work ta'en out,
And give't Iago: what he'll do with it
Heaven knows, not I,
I nothing, but to please his fantasy.
(3.3. 300-03)

Whether one understands the *it* in this utterance to refer to the handkerchief itself or to a copy of it makes little difference. Whether Emilia intends to just "borrow" the handkerchief—to have the design of the handkerchief

copied, so that she can give the original back to Desdemona and the copy to Iago—or whether she’ll just give it to him outright—intending to keep the copy for some other, unspecified purpose—is of no consequence since she does not have the chance to copy it. In any case, close attention to Shakespeare’s language reveals that Emilia knows of, but doesn’t fully acknowledge the reasons for, Iago’s intent on procuring the handkerchief. In the words immediately preceding these, she refers to Iago as “wayward” and as having “a hundred times / woo’d me to steal the handkerchief”. E.A.J. Honigmann’s gloss on wayward as meaning “self-willed” and “perverse” makes more sense here than to gloss the word as meaning “capricious” (footnote 296). The idea of deception resounds in the language of Emilia’s soliloquy: ‘wayward’, ‘woo’, ‘steal’, and ‘conjured’ are all words which suggest some degree of deceptiveness on the part of both Iago and Othello, yet she seems to resist the force of her own rhetoric. Although there is no reason to think that she knows exactly what he’ll do with the handkerchief, Iago’s willfulness in obtaining it speaks against Emilia’s believing that it is merely a whim on his part. Iago’s intent is more momentous than mere whim could sustain, and Emilia, who cannot yet allow herself to acknowledge this, suspects it.

The folio renders the final line of Emilia’s resolution, “I nothing, but to please his fantasy”; the quarto renders it, “I nothing know, but for his fantasy” (footnote 303). In the former, one might understand Emilia as negating her identity, as claiming that she is nothing but a vessel for Iago’s desires; whereas in the latter, she seems to express a willful ignorance: I don’t want to know anything other than that Iago desires this handkerchief. In either case, Emilia, confronted with her freedom to act, or not, in accord with Iago’s desires and against Desdemona’s, refuses to acknowledge her choice and instead feigns ignorance. And by doing so, she “puts [herself] in bad faith” (Sartre 68).

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre posits a theory of bad faith, or in-authenticity, the essence of which is sustained self-deception, and in some instances, self negation:

...the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. (Sartre 1956:48)

In her desire to flee from what she suspects is the case, namely that Iago has malignant intentions for the handkerchief, that “he is not what he is”, Emilia

aims to establish that she knows not what she knows. Thus far, she is deceiving only herself.

When Emilia offers the handkerchief to Iago, there is a moment when she comes close to confronting him about his perfervid desire for it: “What will you do with’t, that you have been so earnest/To have me filch it?” But Iago snatches the handkerchief, replying “Why, what’s that to you?”, and despite her concern that Desdemona shall “run mad” when she discovers its loss, she acquiesces to his demand that she “Be not acknown on’t” (3.3.323). Emilia, having put herself in bad faith, now acts on it.

Sartre (1956:68), in discussing the state of bad faith, claims “It takes shape in the form of a resolution *not to demand too much*, to count itself satisfied when it is barely persuaded, to force itself in decisions to adhere to uncertain truths....[it] is no question of a reflective, voluntary decision but of a spontaneous determination of our being”. Emilia does not demand that Iago answer her question, “What will you do with’t”; she accepts his evasion, choosing to accept the role to which Iago relegates her.

Later when Desdemona asks her directly about the whereabouts of the handkerchief, Emilia lies:

DESDEMONA

Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?

EMILIA

I know not, madam.

(3.4. 23-25)

Her answer here recalls her earlier lie to herself: “I nothing (know)” (3.3. 303). That Emilia uses the same turn of phrase to lie to her friend as she had when she denied knowing of Iago’s intentions substantiates my claim that Emilia deliberately denied knowing what she knew to be true. That initial self-deception has determined her being in the world, and her assumption of her role as Iago’s accomplice compels her to lie, even as it conflicts with her love for Desdemona.

Critics concur that the question of why Emilia both lies directly to Desdemona and then neglects to speak up even when Othello angrily confronts Desdemona about the whereabouts of the handkerchief is a deeply problematic one. However, even a cursory glance at the critical literature points to a critical divide about the answer to this question. Some critics think that Emilia’s actions are wilful. Both Ralph Berry and Harry Berger attribute, in part, her failure to divulge what she knows to class resentment.

Berry points out that neither Iago nor Emilia is to the manor born. Iago, who is eager for promotion to Lieutenant, is bitter because although Iago has battle experience, Cassio is of the upper class; so, he gets the promotion. Berry (1988:116) suggests that Emilia shares Iago's resentment of class and that this motivates her reticence with Iago. Berger (1996:247), too, asserts that class resentment might be one of the motivating factors for Emilia's silence: "one of the motives imaginable for Emilia is a socially coded pleasure in watching one's betters misbehave and suffer". Other critics claim that Emilia acts unwittingly. E.A.J. Honigmann (1998:44), in his introduction to *Othello*, asserts that "[f]ear of Iago, though not expressed explicitly, explains Emilia's attitude as Shakespeare's tragedy unfolds". Unfortunately, Honigmann offers no argument in support of this proposition.

Carol Thomas Neely strikes a middle ground in her view of Emilia as neither willful nor unwitting. She asserts that when Emilia steals the handkerchief she acts in accord with the "wifely virtues of silence, obedience, and prudence" (Neely 1993:131), and that when she gives it to Iago, she is "thereby making herself subservient to him and placing her loyalty to her husband above affection for Desdemona. Her silence about its whereabouts confirms her choice" (Neely 1993:129). Thus, according to Neely, Emilia accepts that there are duties wives have toward their husbands, and her lie to Desdemona is a result of her belief that she is bound by duty not to speak up about what she knows to be the case.

I, too, strike a middle ground in my view of Emilia as neither willful nor unwitting, but I do think Emilia is not only acted upon, but acts. Although I concur with Neely that Emilia is prey to the dominant ideology of wifely virtue, I disagree that it is either her conception of duty or her desire to act in accord with this ideology that compels her to lie. As the willow scene makes clear, Emilia recognizes the degree to which women's pre-ordained social roles consign them to suffer and restrict their freedom to act, and to a certain extent, she accepts her social role. But she does not identify with it, that is, she does not buy into it, and for the right price, she would defy it. Indeed, it is freedom, not necessity, which initiates Emilia's lies, both to herself and to Desdemona. She lies to Desdemona because she has chosen to live in denial of the truth which she cannot acknowledge, that she had the choice to act otherwise. Sartre (1956:69) writes about bad faith that "what it decides first, in fact, is the nature of truth". Emilia's denial has become the truth in which she lives.

Neely (1993:123) is correct in claiming that it is in the willow scene where "friendship between women is established". It is at this point which

one begins to sense Emilia’s identification with, and love for, Desdemona. However, I do not agree with Neely that it is this love which gives Emilia the courage and strength to repudiate Iago. Even now, she is unable to escape her bad faith. To be sure, this scene is so painful in part because Emilia fails to acknowledge the claim that Desdemona’s pain makes upon her. It will take an Amazonian effort of freedom for Emilia to reclaim her self.

Only when Othello has murdered Desdemona and has presented Emilia with evidence of Iago’s treachery does she fully accept it. Her curse of Othello upon finding her murdered mistress: “O gull, O dolt,/As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed” (5.2.159-60) is dyadic; it is as much a self-curse as it is the curse of an other. And it is only when Iago admits that he has told Othello that Desdemona had been unfaithful that she acts to expose him, but the way in which Emilia structures her expose reveals her own discursive conflict:

EMILIA
Villainy, villainy, villainy!
I think upon’t, I think I smell’t, O villainy!
I thought so then: I’ll kill myself for grief!
O villainy, villainy!
(5.2.187-90)

Emilia’s hesitant, almost stuttering pronouncement of self in the anaphora of “I think...I think” is literally positioned within and confined by her apostrophe, “Villainy... O villainy, villainy!” What has been intuition struggles to become nascent thought; Emilia’s words here serve as synecdoche for her hesitancy to acknowledge her own complicity in Iago’s villainy. That she *smells* Iago’s villainy attests to the visceral effect her realization has had upon her. But even as she is framed by her apostrophe for Iago, she frames herself: “I thought so then” suggests some prior consciousness of Iago’s plot, and “I’ll kill myself for grief”, her acceptance of the consequences of her failure to act in time.

Now she knows that she has a moral responsibility to speak up for Desdemona. When Othello mentions that it was the sight of the handkerchief in Cassio’s hands which convinced him of Desdemona’s deceit, Iago sees recognition in Emilia’s eyes and urges her to hold her peace, once again, to “[b]e not acknown on’t” (3.3.324). Emilia responds in language oddly and appropriately reminiscent of the language she used earlier in finding the handkerchief, the moment when she conspired to write Iago’s script. Now, in what I imagine to be an epiphanic shriek, she screams: “ ’Twill out, ’twill

out! I peace?/ No, I will speak as liberal as the north” (5.2 218-219). If Emilia did “have the work ta’en out” (3.3.300) before she’d given the handkerchief to Iago, that is, had she taken the twill out to so that the handkerchief would not have been recognizable as Desdemona’s, then she would not now have to condemn her husband, and in doing so, condemn herself. Emilia’s anguished cry is her belated recognition that all along she has been free to act and is, thus, responsible for her choice to remain silent.

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