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## Practice exam question

# Women in *Othello*

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Guidance for the question on p. 40 of the magazine.

## Part of the main body of an answer

Shakespeare presents Iago as heightening the drama and offensiveness of his message by using mocking language that mixes racist, animal and diabolical imagery. Female sexuality is presented as something owned and controlled by men: 'you're robbed' he exclaims, going on to speak in more abstract, yet catastrophic terms — 'Your heart is burst, you have lost your very soul' — which underline the seriousness of what has befallen Brabantio as well as build anticipation for the specific details he is about to reveal. The dramatic revelation is made more immediate by a switch to the present tense, and an insistent tripartite repetition of 'now': 'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe'. The vulgar language, using animal terms for both Othello and Desdemona, and the dialect verb 'tupping' for copulation, is emotive and demeaning, particularly for Brabantio, a leading Venetian senator proud of his status, and it casts Desdemona as passive or as succumbing to animal behaviour under the malign influence of Othello, who is presented in such a way as to make the loss of her chastity three times worse, since he is 'old', an animal and 'black'. The reference to colour establishes Othello's race disparagingly: the implication in the 'black' and 'white' sheep contrast is that of interbreeding and, by extension, that a wrong is being committed through interracial sex. Black also has connotations of evil. Indeed, in early modern culture devils were often represented as taking on monstrous forms: this is in keeping with Iago's earlier warning about half of Brabantio's soul being 'lost' and his later command that Brabantio should get up 'Or else the devil will make a grandsire' of him.

While Iago takes advantage of Brabantio's fears of female weakness and their need of protection, he does not engender these fears: together with Roderigo's more measured and mannerly speech about the elopement, he stokes them. Roderigo's speech casts Desdemona's elopement not as an act of love, but as 'a gross revolt' against the authority of her father. His fears thus amplified, Brabantio admits 'this accident is not unlike my dream'. He already had suspicions of Desdemona and, in Brabantio's speeches after the extract, Shakespeare suggests that beliefs about female weakness and need for paternal protection are widespread. Brabantio generalises from Desdemona's elopement to instruct all fathers to beware of their daughters:

'Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds  
By what you see them act. Is there not charms  
By which the property of youth and maidhood  
May be abused?'

Sexuality is presented not as a natural aspect of human behaviour and something over which women have any control or take pleasure from but as something that magic ('charms') incites or which is

provoked by deception (when maidhood is 'abused'). In this type of patriarchal thought, women are once more presented as passive and as the property of men.

Yet female sexuality is depicted as being more complex elsewhere. Through Emilia, female sexuality is depicted as being both the butt of sexist humour and a strength. For example, in Act 2, Scene 1 Iago mocks Emilia. Cassio has just kissed her with a courtly greeting, when Iago comments if she gave him 'so much of her lips/ As of her tongue she oft bestows on' him, Cassio 'would have enough'. Iago's comment is both sexist and crude since the talk of Emilia's 'tongue' suggests both nagging and sex. In a public place by the quayside, where there are several characters on stage, these and Iago's later comments about women being 'wild-cats . . . devils' and so on suggest a culture in which female sexuality is a source of entertainment for men. Emilia's actions on stage, however, might suggest nonchalance, or that she rises above her husband's gross humour. However, as the scene progresses, Desdemona takes control of the conversation, having Iago invent praises while she and Emilia criticise them. Indeed, while Emilia accepts the obedience that was expected from wives to husbands at the time, there is little in her words or actions to suggest weakness. Furthermore, in the willow scene, she is presented as being worldly wise compared to Desdemona, who, if not in need of protection, is perhaps in need of experience. Desdemona's diffidence in posing the question about women's unfaithfulness suggests naivety and awkwardness around sexuality. She prefaces the question with 'dost thou in conscience think', an appeal to 'tell me Emilia' and uses the euphemism 'In such gross kind'. Desdemona's uncertain tone contrasts with Emilia's forthright response that finishes Desdemona's line with assuredness: 'There be some, no question.' Rather than seeming weak or needing protection, Emilia's speech, which is given greater prominence by being at the end of the act, suggests gender equality: women have just the same sensual tastes as men — 'they see, and smell,/And have their palates both for sweet and sour'. While Emilia acknowledges male superiority in her culture, where men are more active and women more passive — 'let them use us well' — the overriding message is of equality, which emerges all the more powerfully for having come as the conclusion to a logically ordered speech that has added prominence and interest through it marking a shift from prose to verse.

## Commentary

- The focus of the question is considered throughout. The answer grapples with the key words 'weak' and 'in need of protection', exploring complexities and, for example, seeing Desdemona as inexperienced rather than weak.
- Methods appropriate to verse drama are explored, including the use of shared lines, the effects of shifts between prose and verse, and comments on the effects of a scene in a public place.
- The argument develops clearly, with shifts being signalled by connectives such as 'yet' and 'however', and new developments through terms such as 'Indeed' and 'furthermore'.
- Context is used in an integrated manner, with brief mentions, such as the comment about early modern representations of devils, being used to cast light on the text.

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