

Desdemona's Handkerchief: Its Symbolic Significance

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One of the devices that often a Shakespearean play uses is a love token to emphasize confinement in a relationship and the possession of one individual by another. Likewise, in *Othello*, the handkerchief presented to Desdemona symbolically represents the marriage bond itself. Throughout *Othello*, the handkerchief is "handled" by almost every character, which reflects a significant problem existing within the marriage. A number of characters are involved in the couple's relationship, thereby interrupting effective communication between the couple to a fatal extent. The handkerchief may appear to be an insignificant object, but throughout the play the way its symbolic importance is revealed, shows that it is really very significant. The handkerchief initially is a gift given to Desdemona by Othello as a love token. It is subsequently symbolically transformed into Desdemona's bedsheets, which she uses to reveal her true innocence and fidelity to Othello; and finally, Desdemona requests that the bedsheets be used to cover her as a death shroud.

To a great extent, the tragedy of *Othello* is put into motion by a seemingly innocent mistake. Desdemona, while trying to ease Othello's headache, mistakenly drops her handkerchief. Although some critics dismiss the handkerchief as trivial, others acknowledge its true significance. Robert Heilman suggests that when Othello rejects Desdemona's offer of the handkerchief, he "rejects the magical powers of love" (213). Katherine Stockholder also views Othello's rejection of the handkerchief as significant, but focuses on Desdemona's failure to notice the dropped handkerchief. ". . . she is too concerned about the real object of her love - Othello Though in offering the token she symbolically offers her love . . . [which] is in no way diminished by the loss of the token" (264). Thus Othello's obsession with the handkerchief brings about the destruction of his marriage.

Early in the play, Brabantio's prejudice towards Othello is revealed as he suggests that Desdemona must be under a "spell" as otherwise she would not love Othello. Othello appears to be confident in himself and in his beloved's love as he asks Desdemona to speak publicly about her feelings; but this request may also suggest that Othello needs reassurance of Desdemona's love; and through her public declaration of love and commitment, Othello receives the needed reassurance. To further criticize Othello, Brabantio believes that Othello has "stolen" Desdemona and that she did not marry him of her own free will: "O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?" (I.ii.62). Despite Othello's outward appearance of confidence, Brabantio's insults profoundly affect him.

Brabantio and Othello, the two significant persons in Desdemona's life, have placed her in the awkward position of having to express her loyalties and feelings for each. Desdemona responds to Brabantio's rage with a purely rational response as she states: "To you I am bound for life and education,/ My life and education both do learn me/ How to respect you, you are the lord of my duty,/ I am hitherto your daughter" (I.iii.182-185). Desdemona acknowledges that she is indebted to her father, but only as a daughter. Although Desdemona clearly states that she is following a natural process of life, Brabantio doubts that Desdemona is betraying him. He later tries to devalue her as he makes an ominous prediction about the marriage: "Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see./ She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.iii.292-293). Brabantio plants the first seed of suspicion in Othello's mind and must share the responsibility of the tragic end of the marriage. Edward Snow suggests that Brabantio's prediction may be connected with male sexual anxiety as he states: "speaking as the cuckolded father, Brabantio construes Desdemona's choice in terms of an Oedipal anxiety that reduces women's capacity for active commitment to a reminder of past betrayals and a premonition of future ones" (402). Brabantio resents Othello as he realizes that he is the biological father replaced by Othello as the central male figure in Desdemona's life.

Moreover, Othello is never truly accepted in the society of predominantly white males as an equal member as he is continually reminded that he is a “foreigner,” and frequently referred to as “the Moor.” From this position of inequality, Othello begins to doubt himself and his faith in Desdemona is shaken badly. Instead of valuing Desdemona, Othello looks for outward signs of fidelity and ultimately becomes obsessed with the whereabouts of the handkerchief. The handkerchief is first referred to when Desdemona offers it to Othello and he rejects it in Act III, scene iii; Emilia picks up the handkerchief to give it to her husband Iago who pleaded for it many times for reasons not known to her. From the outset, Iago knows the value of the handkerchief and is determined to possess it to execute his evil plans. As the handkerchief is passed from one person to the next, the division between Othello and Desdemona grows wider. Because Othello views the handkerchief as a symbol of Desdemona’s fidelity, in a sense, each time it is “handled,” Desdemona’s purity diminishes in Othello’s estimation.

Shakespeare often uses love tokens to emphasize the bestower’s misplaced affection, but more importantly, he uses them to reveal the loss of independence of the recipient. *Othello* and *Cymbeline* have striking similarities; particularly with the characters, Othello and Posthumus, and their views in regard to love tokens. Each character presents his wife a love token which he believes, symbolizes the wife’s fidelity, but actually the love token represents restrictions that exist within the marital relationship. The husband believes that his wife is faithful as long as the token remains in her possession. Both the characters place excessive weight upon the tokens and neglect the true feelings of the beloved.

In *Cymbeline*, the restrictive associations of the love token are illuminated when Posthumus gives Imogen a bracelet which he describes as a “manacle of love” (I.i.122). He uses this “manacle” or “handcuff” to represent the marriage bond itself, but it also emphasizes the confinement within the marriage contract. Posthumus uses the “manacle” to remind Imogen that she is his possession, which is clearly seen when Posthumus says, “I’ll place

[this manacle]/ Upon this fairest prisoner" (122-123). Similarly, in *Othello*, the protagonist gives Desdemona the handkerchief which is also associated with confinement. In describing the origins of the handkerchief, Othello reveals the conditional love he feels for Desdemona. In Act III, scene iv, Othello knows that Desdemona does not have the handkerchief, and he implies that something ominous will happen if the handkerchief is lost: "To lose 't or give 't away were such perdition/ As nothing else could match" (67-68). Othello is using this love token to entrap Desdemona in falsity. Because Othello's judgment is based solely upon appearance; he notes only that Desdemona lies to him. Boose contends that Desdemona's lie may "seem a troublesome deception in terms of literal fact, but it is perfectly true in terms of the handkerchief's mythic identity. She cannot actually lose it" (368). The feelings of love that Desdemona possesses for Othello are not lost.

In describing the origin of the handkerchief, Othello tells Desdemona that an Egyptian gave it to his mother, and before his mother's death, she gave it to him. In this version, Othello associates the handkerchief with his mother, fidelity, and magic. He says that an Egyptian told his mother that

while she kept it
T'would make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love, but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies

(III.iv.58-63)

In this situation, Othello is testing Desdemona; because he is not sure if he can trust her. He creates a story which implies that fidelity in a marriage is based upon the possession of a love token. Boose suggests that Othello's story "directs us back into the sphere of myth, custom, and symbolism, the precise level at which we are to identify the handkerchief" (366). Thus, Othello's mythic perception of marriage is emphasized as he states that the handkerchief has the power to "subdue" his father. This reference implies

that Othello believes, his father's love for his mother needed to be controlled. Arthur Kirsch suggests that the superstitious cast of this speech is a regression "not merely to Othello's literally primitive past, but to the primitive world of a child's merger with his mother, and there is already implicit in what Othello says the sense of his own primal betrayal" (736). Othello has observed his parents' marriage and found that his mother calmed his father. He hopes now that Desdemona will put his fears to rest, but because he uses such an indirect and mysterious method to express his fears, Desdemona does not understand his concern and therefore cannot offer the expected comfort that Othello is seeking. Othello again weaves the notion of entrapment into his view of marriage as he suggests that his father will "hunt" after "new fancies"; closely associated with a "hunt," which is the inevitable "trap" used to catch the "new fancies."

In the above passage, Othello unknowingly articulates the contradiction of the love token. Instead of merely representing love, the handkerchief becomes the definitive test of love. Edward Snow sees the contradiction of the love token as he suggests that the story Othello narrates to Desdemona about the handkerchief "entangles the erotic impulses on filial relationships, and brings to the fore just those anxieties which such a 'recognizance and pledge of love' is intended to dispel" (403). Othello has essentially laid the foundation of his own trap by creating an unrealistic belief in the powers of an inanimate object and imposing this belief on Desdemona.

Further reinforcing the idea of entrapment, Shakespeare introduces ideas associated with "weaving" through the image of Desdemona's handkerchief and Iago's language. Iago, alone in a soliloquy, lays the foundation for his plans to entrap Cassio. In Act II, scene i, Iago speaks metaphorically of himself as the spider who will spin a web that will entrap Cassio: "With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (169-170). Clearly Iago believes that there will be little difficulty in arousing Othello's jealousy, and he will use Cassio as the bait. A similar image of entrapment is used when Iago speaks of Desdemona: "And out of her own

goodness make the net/ That shall enmesh them all" (II.iii.368-369). Othello connects the image of entrapment to the handkerchief when he says: "There is magic in the web of it" (III.iv.69). But this magic has a foreboding quality as Othello uses images associated with the grotesque to describe the origins of the handkerchief: "worms were hallowed," "dyed in mummy" and "conserved of maidens' hearts" (III.iv.73-75). Katherine Stockholder suggests that these images have dual meanings. According to her, the embalmed fluid of maidens' hearts suggests "the purity or honesty which Othello, by investing it in a token, places at the disposal of the dishonest Iago, but 'mummy' also suggests a dead purity, untouched by life, a purity that has not been allowed to enrich or exalt life" (268). This is consistent with Othello's approach to marriage as he refuses to listen to Desdemona and continually stifles her. When finally he kills Desdemona, he permanently stifles her through suffocation. Stockholder further suggests that the "image of hallowed worms that bred the silk suggests sexuality, but because the worms were hallowed they also suggest the possible sanctity and beauty of physical union" (266-267). Although consummation of the relationship is implied, this does not necessarily suggest sanctity and beauty in a relationship especially when there is such a lack of harmony between the two lovers. Desdemona and Othello do not view the relationship from the same standpoint. Othello cannot achieve a truly loving relationship with Desdemona primarily because, from the beginning, he is made to feel inferior.

The paradox that exists within the handkerchief, perverse purity within the design, is also present in Othello's estimation of Desdemona. Othello has adopted a philosophy wherein he categorizes all that he encounters. The colors of the handkerchief, white and red, reinforce the notion of categorization. The "white" linen is in sharp contrast to the "red" strawberries which emphasize the extreme views Othello holds about Desdemona. Either she is completely pure and innocent, associated with "white" as he calls her a "sweet Desdemona," or she is passionate and lustful, associated with "red," as he later calls her a "strumpet." This contrasting image of extremes leaves no room for an exception. Lawrence

Ross traces the history of the strawberry throughout art and literature and views the pattern on the handkerchief as having several meanings. He notes that "the strawberry is a symbol very frequently associated with the Virgin and is generally known to appear in many pictures of the mystical enclosed garden among the flowers used to express her virtues" (234). Boose associates the strawberry with virginity as she explains that Elizabethan gardeners considered the strawberry as the purest of fruits for "the treble-leafed strawberry plant bore a red fruit from its initially white flower. Furthermore, the plant itself was part of the generic rose family, the flower most frequently associated with love and desire" (362). These associations of the strawberry with the Virgin and virginity reinforce the sublime view Othello holds of Desdemona. Ross further suggests that because the handkerchief is "spotted with strawberries" it may "represent Othello's distorted image of Desdemona as [a] perilously deceitful beauty, [and] as the adulterous and hypocritical fair woman" (239).

Most critics agree that the "spotted handkerchief" symbolically represents Desdemona's bedsheets. Boose contends that Shakespeare depends on the audience to be familiar with an age-old custom of publicly displaying the stained wedding sheets as evidence of the consummated marriage (363). Cherrell Guilfoyle asserts that in Othello's mind the "spotted handkerchief" and the "bed lust stained" are inseparable and therefore, when Othello kills Desdemona he cannot view her as a "purified victim" (309). Othello's behavior has become progressively more irrational as he loses control of his emotions. In Act IV, scene ii, Desdemona acknowledges the change in Othello's behavior and realizes that her words hold no value for Othello; therefore, she makes an effort to prove her fidelity and remind Othello of her true innocence by asking Emilia to bring her wedding sheets: "Do not talk to me Emilia./ I cannot weep, nor answer have I none/ But what should go by water. Prithee tonight/ Lay on my bed my wedding sheets" (102-105). Desdemona's only recourse is to physically show Othello the proof of her innocence. At some level, Desdemona understands that Othello bases his actions upon what he physically sees. Desdemona no longer has physical possession of the handkerchief and tries

to symbolically replace it with the bed sheets. In Othello's estimation, fidelity does not exist without an outward sign; and Desdemona tries to use the bedsheets to accommodate Othello's need for a symbolic token.

As the handkerchief undergoes various symbolic transformations, its significance becomes more alarming. The initially innocent love token has symbolically been replaced with the wedding sheets, which are ultimately transformed into Desdemona's death shroud as Desdemona states to Emilia: "If I die before thee, Prithee shroud me/ In one of those same sheets" (IV.iii.23-24). Snow asserts that Desdemona tries to recall her true sexual self for Othello by asking "that the wedding sheets be lain. But the real symbol of her lawful sexual nature means nothing to Othello, to whom the handkerchief version, the one passed back and forth between man and man, means all" (14). Ultimately, Desdemona senses Othello's rage and makes plans for her own death.

Othello confronts Desdemona with his proof of her supposed infidelity, "I saw my handkerchief in [Cassio's] hand" (V.ii.62). Although Othello allowed Desdemona to speak on his behalf when he was challenged by Brabantio, now he refuses to allow her to speak in her own defense, emphasizing Desdemona's literal loss of voice in the marriage. In Othello's estimation, Desdemona has made a "fool" of him and he believes that he must defend his "honor" by taking revenge. Valerie Traub contends that in certain Shakespearean plays: "Male anxiety toward female erotic power is channeled into a strategy of containment. Through this strategy, the threat of female erotic power is psychically contained by means of a metaphoric and dramatic transformation of women into jewels, statues, and corpses" (216).

Othello permanently "silences" Desdemona through murder, and even after he realizes his mistake, he does not recognize Desdemona as an individual, as he equates himself to the Indian who "threw a pearl away" (V.ii.347).

In the final act, Iago's conscience plays no role in his behavior and he chooses to remain silent, "What you know, you know./ From this time forth I never will speak word" (V.ii.303-304). Othello's misplaced value upon a token has left him vulnerable to Iago's deceptions which resulted in the tragic outcome of the marriage. Othello's perception of the handkerchief as the symbol of fidelity in marriage led him to miscalculate Desdemona's true nature.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare calls into question the sanctity of marriage and explores the various manipulations and expectations that characters impose upon each other. Many of the tragic actions can be traced to Brabantio and Iago. These two characters refuse to accept Othello as an equal member of society and therefore must share in the responsibility for the destruction of Othello and Desdemona. The marriage had the potential of being quite beautiful as Shakespeare united two individuals from very different backgrounds. But the potential harmony that could have been achieved between the two cultures was destroyed. Iago and Brabantio are not alone in their destructive behavior. Othello must ultimately be held responsible for the tragedy. His eager willingness to accept circumstances without focusing on the true situation left him vulnerable to Iago's deceptions. In *Othello*, Shakespeare demonstrates just how fragile the marriage bond can be when the individuals place greater value on tokens than on the beloved. The fragility is emphasized by the use of a fragile symbol, i.e. the handkerchief.

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