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The Twisting of the Shrew: Maria Edgeworth and *Othello*

Maria Edgeworth's "An Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification" brilliantly lampoons the dynamics of traditional gender roles within a marriage, suggesting that the stereotypical nagging wife is not just an irritating presence in the man's life – the "old ball and chain" as is the sexist common parlance – but is waging outright psychological warfare against her husband. However, for many women, especially *Othello*'s Desdemona and Emilia, who are both killed by their husbands, the idea of "husband-as-enemy" that Edgeworth satirically conveys is quite literal. Claiming that Othello's downfall, and the resulting murders of Desdemona and Emilia, is only the result of Othello's misogyny is a massive oversimplification that ignores how being othered by his peers affects his psyche; however, it is also clear that the misogynistic attitudes about which Edgeworth writes are heavily, and more violently, present in *Othello*'s environment and within Othello himself. As such, Iago is able to leverage the misogynistic attitudes and traditional gender roles present in the society around the characters to persuade Othello of Desdemona's supposed infidelity. Ironically, Desdemona's own use of rhetoric, which often parallels Edgeworth's advice, helps to "confirm" Iago's slander against her. Lacking the information necessary to identify the complexity or the danger of her relationship with Othello, Desdemona is unable and unwilling to divert or match Othello's rhetorical and, ultimately, his physical attacks against her. Furthermore, it is Emilia, who is more experienced than Desdemona in wifely rhetoric, who, unable to save her mistress, brings her husband to

justice by abandoning the manipulations of marriage and accusing Iago outright, resulting in her death. While Edgeworth's methods of self-justification clearly work for the housewives she envisions as her hypothetical students — and such methods even prove effective for Emilia and Desdemona early on in the play — they are not enough to defend the wives when their husbands' rhetorical attacks escalate into physical violence.

The nagging, shrewish wife archetype is clearly present throughout the play in the attitudes of the male characters. In particular, the marriage between Iago and Emilia is one Edgeworth might have recognized — that of the beleaguered but jealous husband and the garrulous wife. Speaking of Emilia in Act 2 Scene 1, Iago states “Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / as of her tongue she oft bestows on me, you would have enough” (*Othello* 2.1.113–114). Further, following Desdemona's protestation that “Alas, she has no speech!” Iago continues, “In faith, too much. / I find it still when I have list to sleep” (*Othello* 2.1.115–117). Though she is contradicting Edgeworth's advice for wives to avoid argument by being so boring that their husband falls asleep, Iago's complaints still paint Emilia as a wife who, by keeping Iago from sleep with her incessant talking, wages the rhetorical warfare against her husband for which Edgeworth advocates. As Edgeworth asks her students, “Are you voluble enough to drown all sense in a torrent of words? Can you be loud enough to overpower the voice of all who shall attempt to interrupt or contradict you?” (132). Indeed, even as Iago complains about his own wife, he later recognizes, and leverages, the societal power a wife has in persuading her husband, telling Cassio “our general's wife is now the general” (*Othello* 1.3.333–334). Both Iago's gripes and advice regarding the status of a wife in *Othello's* society suggest that the nag, while irritating, has power over the man's life, just as Edgeworth satirically desires.

Though honest-to-a-fault Desdemona's protestations suggest that the perpetually scheming Iago is likely exaggerating his wife's flaws, there is clearly a culture of animosity between husbands and wives that not only informs Iago's exaggerations and his scheme to turn Othello against Desdemona, but is also felt by the wives, particularly Emilia. As Emilia states in Act 4, Scene 3, when she and Desdemona discuss adultery, "But I do think it is their husband's faults / If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties / and pour treasures into foreign laps; / or else break out in peevish jealousies, / throwing restraint upon us" (*Othello* 4.3.97–100). Emilia, Desdemona's more cynical counterpart, acknowledges the pain that men can cause their wives, despite the supposed influential power wives are meant to have over their husbands.

As Edgeworth notes throughout her essay, the wife's influence is meant to be a means of gaining back power in her marriage, generally over the domestic domain, in the face of an institution which otherwise leaves her at the mercy of her husband, making him – no matter how kind – her "enemy". Emilia continues, "Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge." (*Othello* 4.3.101–104). Acting out, through adultery or self-justification, is, to Emilia and Edgeworth, the woman's only recourse to "maintain unrivalled dominion at home and abroad" — to try to gain an equal footing with her husband (Edgeworth 139).

Yet, while Edgeworth's ideas of the husband as the enemy of his wife and the wife using whatever means she can to retain power is clearly present in *Othello's* society, the role of the nagging wife is so omnipresent that even the loving Desdemona appears to use rhetorical tactics – including those Edgeworth proposes – not to fight against her husband, but to fight for what she believes would be his and Cassio's happiness. Throughout Act 3, Scene 3, Desdemona's mission is to reconcile her husband with his former lieutenant. To accomplish this, Desdemona

employs the tactic, which Edgeworth heartily endorses, of “harass[ing] him with perpetual petty skirmishes” (133). Desdemona nags Othello to meet with Cassio in the hope that she “will gradually weary the patience, and break the spirit of [her] opponent” (Edgeworth 133). As Desdemona reassures Cassio, “My lord shall never rest: / I’ll watch him tame and talk him out of patience; / his bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift; I’ll intermingle everything he does with Cassio’s suit” (*Othello* 3.3.24–28). Though Desdemona continues Emilia’s trend of using forced wakefulness to persuade her husband rather than attempting to bore him to sleep, as Edgeworth suggests, the basic principle remains the same — the wife uses her rhetorical power to take control of her husband’s bodily functions, forcing him to accede to her demands to regain control over his sleep schedule.

Moreover, Edgeworth suggests a man who is generous, brave, and of an active temper, as Othello appears to be, gives the wife, “inestimable advantage, for he will set a high value upon a thing for which you have none – time. He will acknowledge the force of your arguments merely from a dread of their length” (133). Desdemona also utilizes this tactic, suggesting, when Othello requests that he meet with Cassio to discuss his suit later, “Why then tomorrow night, or Tuesday morn, / On Tuesday noon or night; on Wednesday morn. / I prithee name the time, but let it not / Exceed three days”, to which Othello replies, after more chatter “Prithee, no more. Let him come when he will; / I will deny thee nothing” (*Othello* 3.3.68–71, 83–84). Though Iago, later in the same scene, undermines Desdemona’s ability to persuade Othello any further, Othello’s overwhelmed assent here demonstrates the success of her first attempts at wifely rhetoric.

However, Desdemona’s skill at using various rhetorical tactics, even the more informal ones Edgeworth teaches, is not particularly surprising. She is shown from the outset of the play to be an excellent rhetorician, whose voice is valued in the trial against Othello. Othello himself

suggests that Brabantio and the senators listen to what Desdemona has to say, stating “I do beseech you, / Send for the lady to the Sagittary / And let her speak of me before her father.” (*Othello* 3.4.134–136). Othello trusts Desdemona’s persuasive skills enough to stake his life on them, setting the stage for the tragic reversal that occurs throughout the play.

Desdemona’s rhetorical skill is first demonstrated in her speech to the senate and especially to her father, as she acknowledges his importance in her life — “My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty. / 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 duty. / I am hitherto your daughter” (*Othello* 1.3.208–213). She then crafts an argument that appeals to Brabantio’s pride, stating, “But here’s my / husband. / And so much duty as my mother showed / To you, preferring you before her father, / So much I challenge that I may profess / Due to the Moor my lord” (*Othello* 1.3.213–218). Though Brabantio is still furious with the couple, he must accede to the strength of Desdemona’s argument. In arguing so passionately and so well for the legitimacy of her marriage, Desdemona is perfectly, though less calculatingly, executing Edgeworth’s advice — “In your first setting out, you must establish credit; in proportion to your credit will be the value of your future asseverations” (134). Accordingly, Desdemona should have been brilliantly setting herself up to influence her husband to reinstate Cassio to his position, among many other issues over the course of her life. Unfortunately, her father’s words and Iago’s machinations twist Desdemona’s power against her, making her an unknowing and unwilling accessory to her own murder.

Unfortunately for Desdemona, it appears that, by arguing for her marriage and establishing credit with her husband, she has also gone against Edgeworth’s advice to influence her father “with caution, however, lest by discovering their arms too soon, [women] preclude

themselves from the power of using [their rhetorical skills] to the fullest advantage hereafter” (132). Indeed, once her rhetorical powers have been revealed, Brabantio drops his threats of persecution against her new husband, but does leave him with a warning — “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (*Othello* 1.3.333–334). Othello, still in the throes of love and not yet under Iago’s influence, responds, “My life upon her faith” (*Othello* 1.3.335). The seed has been planted, however, for Iago to twist Desdemona’s attempts to be an influential wife into the appearance of adultery.

Iago’s cruel brilliance lies in manipulating those around him to unwittingly act against their own interests. Though his schemes lie primarily in influencing Othello into believing in his wife’s infidelity, using Roderigo, Cassio, and Emilia as pawns, Iago’s plot also explicitly depends on Desdemona attempting to influence Othello to reconcile with Cassio. When unveiling his plan to the audience in Act 1, Scene 3, Iago states that, by manipulating Desdemona into arguing for Cassio’s reinstatement, he has set up a scenario by which “She shall undo her credit with the Moor. / So will I turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (*Othello* 1.3.373–382). Though it is Iago’s influence over Othello that ultimately leads to Desdemona’s death, it is her attempts to use her influence as a wife, as is her cultural position in their marriage, that subtly confirms for Othello, among other evidence set up by Iago, that Desdemona is committing adultery with Cassio. As such, Desdemona’s use of rhetoric as an act of loyalty to her husband is twisted to degenerate her character — the tools Edgeworth recommends to protect a wife from her husband are now used to put Desdemona in further danger.

Furthermore, just as her use of rhetoric is used to condemn her, Desdemona’s use of the wifely rhetorical tactics also begins to falter when she needs to defend herself. As Edgeworth

warns, “Timid brides, you have, probably, hitherto been addressed as angels – prepare for the time when you shall again become mortal. Take the alarm at the first approach of blame, at the first hint of a discovery that you are anything less than infallible.” (132). While Desdemona is certainly alarmed by the change in Othello’s mood, she does not jump to the defensive position that Edgeworth advocates — blinded by her love, Desdemona fails to understand her enemy. Indeed, Edgeworth even specifically advises caution for women with jealous husbands, as Desdemona’s is, stating, “If he be a man of high spirit, jealous of command, and impatient of control...you must proceed with extreme circumspection.” (133). However, Desdemona refuses to believe Othello’s jealousy, even when Emilia specifically suggests it, responding “Who, he? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him” (*Othello* 3.4.30–32).

As such, Desdemona is not prepared to argue with her love, and so, in their argument in Act 3, Scene 4, Desdemona does not think to defend herself from Othello’s implications, but instead doubles down on trying to assist Cassio, further condemning herself and, though she denies Othello’s accusations and questions his actions, she refuses to condemn him to defend herself. Though she unwittingly and unsuccessfully utilizes Edgeworth’s advice to rife the husband’s temper to gain sympathy from an audience when Othello strikes her, earning Lodovico’s shock and criticism, the defense is not strong enough to prevent her eventual murder (Edgeworth 135; *Othello* 4.1.270–278) . Even just before her murder, Desdemona cannot bring herself to despise Othello enough to fight against him as Edgeworth recommends. By the time Desdemona understands that Othello’s intention is to kill her, he is so convinced of her guilt that her denials and requests for more time are not enough to persuade him, and she is killed still trying to convince him to put off her murder for “while [she] say[s] one prayer” (*Othello* 5.2.104). As Othello responds – “It is too late” (*Othello* 5.2.105).

In a final, ironic twist, it is Emilia – the original nag of the play, the wise older woman who understands the danger that men can pose against their wives – who ultimately restores Desdemona’s honour, not by employing any of Edgeworth’s tricks, but by openly rescinding her loyalty to her husband and stating the honest truth. Seeing how Desdemona’s attempts to use persuasion to influence her husband have utterly failed, Emilia rejects her previous tactics and the use of subversive rhetoric to maintain power within a marriage, instead openly betraying her husband, stating, “Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak. / ’Tis proper I obey him, but not now. / Perchance, Iago, I will ne’er go home” (*Othello* 5.2.231–234). Emilia has witnessed, and is about to experience, marital conflict being taken to its most violent extreme. As much as Edgeworth’s tactics are clever ways for wives to gain leverage within a marriage, what occurs in *Othello* is the result of a society in which spouses are, it would seem, inherently pitted against each other and where, in a competition between men’s rhetoric and women’s rhetoric, men’s rhetoric wins out — in this case, to violent ends. If a wife is unwilling or unable to match her husband when her marriage escalates beyond Edgeworth’s petty skirmishes, she, like Desdemona and Emilia, cannot protect herself.

Though doing so results in her death, Emilia’s open rejection of her marriage in favour of redeeming Desdemona’s name is what ultimately allows Othello to understand the mistake he has made, bring Iago to justice, and restore Desdemona’s reputation when she can no longer defend herself. Though Edgeworth’s tactics are able to satirically suggest ways for a woman to defend herself against her husband and gain power within marriage, it is clear from the events of *Othello* that, though the consequences may be dire, the subtlety of rhetoric, especially without all the necessary information, cannot substitute outright rejection of a system designed to disempower a group of people — in this case, (married) women. As powerful as rhetoric



— casual or formal, public or private, male or female — can be, even in the face of systematic oppression, it cannot be effective if those arguing with their oppressors are unaware of or do not understand the threat against them, especially when those with systematic power are willing and able to escalate to violence. For rhetoric to work, the rhetor must tailor their words and actions to their opponent, and the opponent must be receptive to the rhetor's words and actions. Words not said to those who won't listen do nothing.

Works Cited

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