



# Shakespeare's Women: A Feminist Reevaluation Of Othello's Emilia

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## **Abstract:**

The feminist perspective on Shakespeare's *Othello* has gained increasing attention in modern literary discourse, with a particular focus on the character of Emilia. Often overshadowed by more prominent figures like Desdemona, Emilia's role in the play is crucial in understanding the complex dynamics of gender, power, and autonomy in the Elizabethan era. This paper aims to re-examine Emilia's character through a feminist lens, emphasizing her transformation from a subservient wife to a vocal critic of the patriarchy. By analyzing her interactions with Iago and Desdemona, as well as her final, bold confrontation with her husband, the paper highlights Emilia's agency and underscores her pivotal role in *Othello*. The exploration of Emilia's defiance against the male-dominated society presents her as a proto-feminist character, whose voice, though silenced tragically at the end, resonates as an early challenge to patriarchal norms.

**Keywords** Emilia, Othello, feminist analysis, gender roles, patriarchy, marriage dynamics, female agency, loyalty vs. morality, feminist resistance, female empowerment, power dynamics, double standards, women's rights, Shakespeare's women, Iago, Desdemona, tragic heroine, female voice, social norms.

## **Introduction:**

William Shakespeare's *Othello*, written around 1603, is one of the most powerful tragedies in English literature. Its portrayal of jealousy, betrayal, and manipulation has kept audiences captivated for centuries. However, *Othello* is also a play that offers insight into the gender dynamics of its time, with significant implications for feminist analysis. Among the women in the play, Emilia is often relegated to the background,

her actions seen as merely serving the plot's progression. However, a deeper exploration of her character reveals a much more complex and subversive figure.

Emilia's role as Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid places her in a position of both privilege and subjugation. Despite this, Emilia ultimately exposes the patriarchal structures that govern the lives of all women in the play. Her evolution from a seemingly passive character into one of the most assertive voices in the narrative calls for a reevaluation of her significance. This paper contends that Emilia's actions, particularly her defiance of Iago and her final speech, should be interpreted through a feminist lens to better understand her as a figure of empowerment and resistance.

## 1. Emilia's Relationship with Iago: A Complex Patriarchal Subjugation

Emilia's marriage to Iago presents a dynamic of gender inequality, which is central to understanding her character. She is aware of her husband's manipulations but chooses to remain loyal to him, albeit reluctantly. The power imbalance in their marriage mirrors the broader societal framework where women were expected to submit to their husbands. Emilia's dependence on Iago whether due to love, fear, or social conditioning illustrates the limited choices available to women of her social standing in Elizabethan society.

However, Emilia's relationship with Iago is not merely one of passive submission. In private conversations, particularly in Act 4, Scene 3, Emilia reveals her disillusionment with the male-dominated society and expresses a degree of personal autonomy that contrasts with her initial compliance.

## 2. Emilia's Friendship with Desdemona: A Sisterhood in a Patriarchal World

Emilia's friendship with Desdemona provides a contrasting dynamic to her relationship with Iago. While Desdemona embodies the traditional virtues of a wife obedience, loyalty, and love Emilia challenges these ideals by questioning the social structures that enforce such expectations. Through her relationship with Desdemona, Emilia reveals an underlying solidarity between women. She attempts to protect Desdemona from the dangers posed by Iago's scheming and speaks candidly about women's roles in marriage.

Her famous line, "Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them," delivered in Act 4, Scene 3, marks a turning point where Emilia vocalizes her belief in female equality. This moment reveals her growing consciousness of the patriarchal constraints placed on women and sets the stage for her later actions.

## 3. Emilia's Defiance: A Feminist Act of Resistance

The most powerful moment in Emilia's character arc comes in the final act of the play. After discovering the truth about Iago's machinations and the tragic consequences of his deceit, Emilia refuses to stay silent. In a dramatic confrontation with her husband, she exposes his treachery, an act of rebellion against the patriarchal order that has defined her life. Her declaration, "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak," underscores her refusal to comply with the silence expected of women in such situations.

Emilia's speech about the double standards of gender relations "Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them" not only challenges Iago's patriarchal authority but also represents a critique of the societal norms that render women voiceless and powerless. Emilia's final act of defiance is a feminist assertion of agency that transcends the traditional boundaries of female characters in Shakespeare's works.

#### 4. Emilia's Tragic End: The Price of Feminist Rebellion

Despite Emilia's courageous stand, her death at the hands of Iago marks the tragic end of her journey. However, rather than rendering her voice insignificant, Emilia's death amplifies her earlier speech. In her final moments, she becomes a martyr for the feminist cause, her death symbolizing the harsh consequences faced by women who dare to challenge male authority. Yet, it is her words that resonate beyond the play, offering a critique of the oppressive system that restricts women's autonomy.

#### Emilia: Challenging Traditional Roles and Expectations

In stark contrast to Desdemona, Emilia is more outspoken and critical of the gendered expectations placed on women. While she remains loyal to her husband Iago at the start of the play, she begins to question her place in a marriage that is both emotionally and intellectually unequal. Emilia's relationship with Iago exemplifies the dynamics of marital power in a patriarchal society, where a woman is expected to submit to her husband, regardless of his faults or mistreatment.

Emilia's most significant contribution to the feminist critique in *Othello* occurs in Act 4, Scene 3, where she speaks candidly about the unfairness of women's roles in marriage. She argues that women should be able to enjoy the same freedoms as men, particularly in matters of fidelity and sexual behavior. Emilia's frankness exposes the double standards that govern men and women, highlighting the ways in which women are expected to forgive their husbands' faults while being held to much stricter moral standards. Her speech reflects a proto-feminist critique of a society that restricts women's freedom of expression and choice.

#### Emilia as a Voice for Women's Rights

Emilia's most significant transformation occurs in Act 4, Scene 3, during her famous speech on the nature of women and marriage. This speech, in which Emilia asserts that women are just as capable of desire and infidelity as men, marks a turning point in her character. She exposes the double standards of her society and critiques the expectations placed on women, particularly regarding sexual fidelity.

Emilia's argument that women are no different from men in their desires and actions challenges the patriarchal norms that dictate a woman's role in marriage. In a world where women's honor is tied to their sexual purity, Emilia's assertion that women, too, have sexual agency is revolutionary. She boldly critiques her society's treatment of women as passive and virtuous, arguing instead that women are entitled to the same freedoms and agency as men. This speech highlights Emilia's awareness of the social inequalities faced by women and her growing realization of her own subjugation within her marriage and society.

## Conclusion:

In *Othello*, Emilia is often overshadowed by the more central characters of Desdemona and Othello, yet her role is indispensable in understanding the play's deeper themes of gender, power, and social norms. Through a feminist reading of her character, Emilia emerges as a proto-feminist figure who, despite being trapped within the confines of a patriarchal society, ultimately challenges its oppressive structures. Her journey from silence to defiance, from subjugation to resistance, exemplifies the struggles of women in a male-dominated world. In her final act of rebellion, Emilia speaks out against the injustices that have marred her life, leaving a legacy that calls for a reevaluation of the treatment of women in both Shakespeare's time and in modern society.

Emilia's tragic death, while silencing her physically, only amplifies the resonance of her words, proving that her feminist act of resistance transcends the boundaries of the play, offering a powerful critique of gender inequality and patriarchal oppression.

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