

Love and Jealousy

Othello begins the play with complete love and trust for his new bride, and is manipulated into believing she has committed adultery. The audience knows right from the start, even before Iago begins his lies, that they are lies. Two related questions occur to most people who read or see the play—is Othello too easily fooled into believing Desdemona is unfaithful, and if she were unfaithful, would that excuse his behavior?

Othello describes himself, in his last speech, as “one not easily jealous” and many modern audiences have taken issue with this characterization. They feel Othello is much too quick to believe Iago and that he should have trusted Desdemona. However, modern audiences need to remember that *everyone* in the play has doubts about the marriage. While only Brabantio is prejudiced enough to actually say it to Othello’s face, he and Desdemona are mismatched in a number of ways. Not only are they of different races, he is much older, she was raised in privilege while he was a captured slave and then a fighter. None of this means their relationship would not survive, but it makes doubting it more understandable. Most important of all, Othello had never planned on marrying and appears to have no experience with love. They also have a whirlwind romance, courting and marrying secretly and therefore their entire relationship is based in secrets. After considering these facts, it is easier to understand that Othello is so easily persuaded that Desdemona is carrying on a secret affair; after all, that is essentially what she did with him.

The harder question is how to view Othello’s reaction. He plans to kill both Desdemona and Cassio and seems to believe that this is an appropriate response to being cheated on. Of course, this is obviously wrong and no one would ever behave like this, right? Well, the truth of the matter is that in both Shakespeare’s time and our own, violent jealousy, especially when a spouse cheats, is often at least partially approved of and it is certainly still a recognizable part of our world. One study found that 88% of women and 91% of men had fantasized about killing a romantic rival, and while there is a huge difference between fantasy and reality, those numbers are still staggering. We are all familiar with stalkers and the idea of “if I can’t have you, no one can.” Furthermore, in some parts of the world (interestingly enough, the parts of the world where Othello might have been raised) the idea of “honor killings” is still quasi-legal. In early modern England, a woman’s honor was synonymous with her chastity (which meant no sex for bachelorettes and fidelity for married women) and even if her chastity was taken unwillingly, by rape, she was still considered to be dishonored. Then, as now, a woman who was dishonored brought dishonor on her husband or even her entire family, and only her death could wipe out the stain. Modern Americans may shudder at the idea of honor killings, in Shakespeare or Afghanistan, but we also believe that “a bit” of jealousy is actually good for a relationship because it shows depth of feeling. And we generally believe that a woman cheating on a man is worse than the reverse and that “real men” are willing to fight (literally) for their women. Attitudes like this are not terribly far from honor killings and murdering a spouse in a jealous rage. No one should pretend that Othello’s behavior is unrealistic or even unlikely, either then or now.

