

Plot Context

In Act 3, Scene 4, Desdemona worries over misplacing Othello's handkerchief, while Othello, already poisoned by Iago's lies, fixates on its absence. As she pleads for Cassio's reinstatement, he repeatedly interrupts with demands for the handkerchief, escalating tension. Emilia observes Othello's jealousy emerging and offers a bitter reflection on men's treatment of women. The handkerchief becomes the turning point from suspicion to full-blown mistrust, tightening Iago's grip on Othello.

Thematic Summary

This extract highlights jealousy's destructive power, as Othello twists an innocent loss into "proof" of betrayal. The handkerchief, invested with magical significance, embodies fate and irrational belief. Gender roles surface in Desdemona's innocence, Emilia's cynicism, and Othello's control. Miscommunication and differing perspectives on love and loyalty fuel the tragedy: Desdemona sees the handkerchief as a love token, while Othello makes it a test of fidelity, widening the gulf between them.

Performance Note

On stage, Othello's rising intensity should contrast with Desdemona's confused sincerity. His repetition of "The handkerchief!" can be delivered with increasing force, from strained patience to violent outburst. Physicality—his grip on her hand—can foreshadow later violence. Desdemona's persistence on Cassio highlights her innocence, while Emilia's closing lines provide a sharp, worldly commentary on male appetites. The unseen handkerchief carries dramatic irony, reminding the audience of Iago's manipulation and the fragility of truth.

DESDEMONA

Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?

EMILIA I know not, madam.

DESDEMONA

Believe me, I had rather have lost my purse

Full of crusadoes. And but my noble Moor

Is true of mind and made of no such baseness

As jealous creatures are, it were enough

To put him to ill thinking.

EMILIA Is he not jealous?

DESDEMONA

Who, he? I think the sun where he was born

Drew all such humors from him.

EMILIA Look where he
comes.

Enter Othello.

DESDEMONA

I will not leave him now till Cassio
Be called to him.—How is 't with you, my lord?

OTHELLO

Well, my good lady. Aside. O, hardness to
dissemble!—

How do you, Desdemona?

DESDEMONA Well, my good lord.

OTHELLO

Give me your hand. He takes her hand. This hand
is moist, my lady.

DESDEMONA

It yet has felt no age nor known no sorrow.

OTHELLO

This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart.
Hot, hot, and moist. This hand of yours requires
A sequester from liberty, fasting and prayer,
Much castigation, exercise devout;
For here's a young and sweating devil here
That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand,
A frank one.

DESDEMONA You may indeed say so,
For 'twas that hand that gave away my heart.

OTHELLO

A liberal hand! The hearts of old gave hands,
But our new heraldry is hands, not hearts.

DESDEMONA

I cannot speak of this. Come now, your promise.

OTHELLO What promise, chuck?

DESDEMONA

I have sent to bid Cassio come speak with you.

OTHELLO

I have a salt and sorry rheum offends me.

Lend me thy handkerchief.

DESDEMONA Here, my lord.

OTHELLO

That which I gave you.

DESDEMONA I have it not about me.

OTHELLO Not?

DESDEMONA No, faith, my lord.

OTHELLO That's a fault. That handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give.

She was a charmer, and could almost read

The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept
it,

'Twould 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 loathèd, and his spirits should hunt

After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me,

And bid me, when my fate would have me wived,

To give it her. I did so; and take heed on 't,

Make it a darling like your precious eye.

To lose 't or give 't away were such perdition

As nothing else could match.

DESDEMONA Is 't possible?

OTHELLO

'Tis true. There's magic in the web of it.

A sybil that had numbered in the world

The sun to course two hundred compasses,

In her prophetic fury sewed the work.

The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,

And it was dyed in mummy, which the skillful

Conserved of maidens' hearts.

DESDEMONA I' faith, is 't true?

OTHELLO

Most veritable. Therefore, look to 't well.

DESDEMONA

Then would to God that I had never seen 't!

OTHELLO Ha? Wherfore?

DESDEMONA

Why do you speak so startingly and rash?

OTHELLO

Is 't lost? Is 't gone? Speak, is 't out o' th' way?

DESDEMONA Heaven bless us!

OTHELLO Say you?

DESDEMONA

It is not lost, but what an if it were?

OTHELLO How?

DESDEMONA I say it is not lost.

OTHELLO Fetch 't. Let me see 't!

DESDEMONA

Why, so I can. But I will not now.

This is a trick to put me from my suit.

Pray you, let Cassio be received again.

OTHELLO

Fetch me the handkerchief! Aside. My mind
misgives.

DESDEMONA Come, come.

You'll never meet a more sufficient man.

OTHELLO

The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA I pray, talk me of Cassio.

OTHELLO The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA A man that all his time
Hath founded his good fortunes on your love;
Shared dangers with you—

OTHELLO

The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA I' faith, you are to blame.

OTHELLO Zounds! Othello exits.

EMILIA Is not this man jealous?

DESDEMONA I ne'er saw this before.

Sure, there's some wonder in this handkerchief!

I am most unhappy in the loss of it.

EMILIA

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man.

They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;

They eat us hungerly, and when they are full

They belch us.

Reflection

1. **Thematic:** How does the handkerchief function as a symbol of love, fidelity, and jealousy in this scene?
2. **Stylistic:** What effect does Othello's repeated demand, "The handkerchief!", have on the pacing and dramatic tension of the exchange?
3. **Conceptual:** In what ways does Emilia's closing comment about men and women broaden the play's exploration of gender and power?