



## WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

### Women and the family

In Shakespeare's England a woman's domain was primarily the household and the family was regarded as a microcosm for the state, an idea evident in many Renaissance sermons, treatises and pamphlets: 'The husband was its governor, the wife and children his loyal and obedient subjects'.<sup>1</sup> Such sentiments are echoed in Shakespeare's texts, such as *The Taming of the Shrew* when Katherina states that 'Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign' (V.ii.152-3).<sup>2</sup>

Robert Cleaver wrote a popular marriage treatise published in 1603, *A Godly Forme of Hovsehold Government* exemplifying the patriarchal power structure and the perceived need for gendered hierarchy, suggesting:

if she not be subiect to her husband, to let him rule all household, especially outward affaires: if she will make head against him, and seeke to haue her owne waies, there will be doing and vndoing. Things will goe backwarde, the house will come to ruine.<sup>3</sup>

There were a number of moral treatises during the Renaissance that argued, as one modern scholar summarises, 'by her speech, the wife disrupts household harmony, by her unchastity she subverts patrilineal inheritance, and by her disobedience she destroys right rule and order in her little state'.<sup>4</sup> The danger of female speech is explored in *Othello*, when Desdemona's appeal to her husband to deal justly with Cassio is misinterpreted as evidence of her infidelity. The misogynist association of uncontrolled female speech with uncontrolled female sexuality fuels Othello's jealousy.

### Women's Sexuality

In the writing of the period there is evidence of a significant degree of anxiety about women's sexuality and how it could be controlled. In a patrilineal society, predating paternity tests, the question of inheritance rested on the ability to guarantee paternity and as a result controlling sexual access to women's bodies became a cultural obsession. Modest behaviour in women was idealised and many treatises from the period focus on the importance of female chastity.

*The Flower of Friendship* by Renaissance writer, Edmund Tilney explains: 'let her indevor to increase a perfection of love, and above all imbrace chastitie. For the happinesse of matrimonie, doth consist in a chaste matrone'.



**Figure 1.** The frontispiece of Thomas Heywood's *A Curtaine Lecture* (1637), which illustrates a wife keeping her husband awake with nagging. STC (2nd ed.) 13312. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

The historian Lisa Jardine has suggested that the charge of sexual promiscuity was the most readily available form of assault on a woman's reputation available in the renaissance.<sup>6</sup> In *Othello* the female characters, Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca, are all accused of sexual promiscuity. Jardine states that Desdemona is accused of committing adultery with Cassio, Emilia has been accused of adultery with Othello, and Bianca (although professionally a courtesan) is accused of running a bawdy house and whoring by Iago and Emilia.<sup>7</sup>

Each woman takes these accusations extremely seriously, reflecting the impact such an accusation could have upon a woman's social standing.<sup>8</sup>

These adulterous accusations against women can be placed in a wider context of an obsession with controlling female sexuality, as evidence from the Ecclesiastical Court records document a large number of cases in which women believed their reputations had been harmed by suggestions of unchaste behaviour.<sup>9</sup> Concerns about defamation of character in the period were decidedly gendered, with women having to be overly concerned about their sexual status, and vigilantly guarding their chastity. In contrast, men 'worried about insults to their social position, their honesty or sobriety as well as about their sexual behaviour'.<sup>10</sup>

This focus perhaps reflects the fact that ideal female behaviour was directly connected with her chastity. Demure and obedient women were easier to control than those who were outspoken and strong-willed, meaning that a discourse celebrating these former qualities developed as celebrated feminine characteristics. It was prevalently believed that if a woman was overly talkative, then she would also be promiscuous.



**Figure 2.** A betrothal ceremony depicted in *A pleasant new ballad of Tobias* (1655–1658). © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Used under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

### Women and Religion

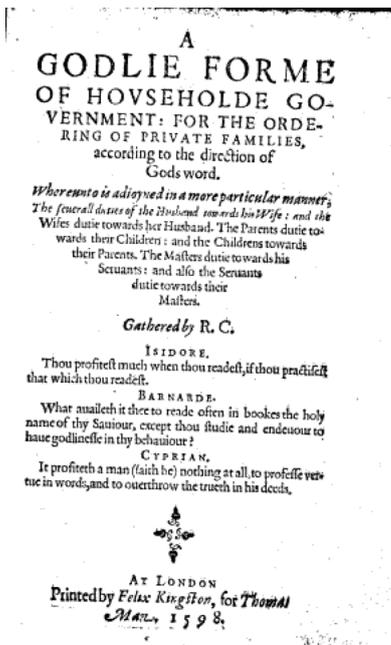
The early church fathers established important regulations and admonitions to women about their behaviour, particularly their sexual behaviour. Women were fundamentally perceived in the church as untrustworthy.

This belief stemmed from the narrative of the original sin and Eve's role in the fall of mankind. Female sexuality, therefore, produced a great deal of anxiety within marriage. *Othello* is anxious and grows increasingly so because he is reminded of Desdemona's early act of disobeying her father and marrying *Othello*. Iago's method is to use the common rhetoric about women's untrustworthiness and uncontrollable desire as evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. As a result many see *Othello's* sexual anxiety as the cause of his desire to dominate and control Desdemona, because her husband's honour depended on her own chastity. Furthermore, marriage tracts of the time focussed on the importance of wifely submission. They emphasised chastity, the need for parental permission before marriage, and the importance of tact, discretion and circumspection in any wife. Desdemona violates these codes completely: with her clandestine marriage, in entertaining Cassio without *Othello's* permission, in speaking for Cassio in spite of *Othello's* evident displeasure, and in concerning herself with affairs outside of the household.<sup>11</sup>

Mary Beth Rose also situated Desdemona within the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean marital discourse. Rose utilises Puritan marital tracts to argue that 'Desdemona presents herself to the Senate as a hero of marriage' because 'she analogizes public and private life, drawing them together and granting them equal distinction'.<sup>12</sup> In Rose's reading of Desdemona, it is *Othello* who falls short of the heroic puritan ideal of marriage when he insists on a hierarchy that subordinates the private to the public.

R. Cleaver's manual on how to manage household life in accordance with the word of God offers information on how women were expected to behave in the marital home. He decreed that:

Every married man ought also to remember this, that either his wife is wise and religious, or else she is foolish and irreligious. If he be matched with a wife that is sottish, foolish, and ignorant of God and his word, it will little availe to profit him to reprehend or chide her: and if he be married to one that is wise and religious and knoweth her dutie out of God's word, then one sharp and discreet word is sufficient: because, if a woman be not corrected by that which is wisely and discretely said, she will never amend by that which is threatened.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 3.** A betrothal ceremony depicted in *A pleasant new ballad of Tobias* (1655–1658). STC 5385. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

In a passage that is of particular relevance to Othello and Desdemona’s marriage, Cleaver instructs the wife on how to behave if her husband is not a good Christian man and how to respond if he accuses her of crimes of which she is innocent:

Now for so much as the Apostle would have Christian wives, that are matched with ungodly husbands, and such as are not yet good Christians, to reverence and obey them: much more should they shew themselves thankful to God, and willingly, and dutifully performe this obedience and subjection, when thy are coupled in marriage with godly, wise, discreet, learned, loving, quiet, patient, honest, thrifty husbands. And therefore they ought evermore to reverence them, and to endeavour with true obedience and love to serve them; to be loth in any wise to offend them, but eather to be careful and diligent to please them, that their soule may blesse them. And if at any time it shall happen that the wife shall anger or displease her husband, by doing or speaking anything that shall grieve him, she ought never to rest until she have pacified him, and gotten his favour againe. And if he shall chance to blame her without cause, and for that which she could helpe or remedy, (which thing sometimes happeneth even of the best men) yet she must beare it patiently, and give him no uncomely or unkinde word for it; but evermore looke upon him with a loving and cheerful countenance; and so rather let her take the fault upon her, then seeme to be displeas’d.<sup>14</sup>

Particularly of interest as context for *Othello*, Cleaver also states that a happy marriage should have: ‘a wise and holy regard had of equalitie in yeeres, of an agreement in religion, of similitude in nature, in manners, in outward estate, condition, and qualitie of person, and such like necessarie circumstances.’<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: a contextual history*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.71

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew* ed. Barbara Hodgdon. The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 2010)

<sup>3</sup> R. Cleaver, *A Godly Forme of Household Government for the Ordering of Priuate Families, According to the Direction of Gods Word* (London: Printed by Thomas Creede for Thomas Man, 1603), p.88 quoted in Vaughan, p.71

<sup>4</sup> Vaughan, p.72

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Tilney, *The Flower of Friendship: A Renaissance Dialogue Contesting Marriage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.128, quoted in Vaughan, p.71

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Jardine, ‘“Why should he call her whore?": Defamation and Desdemona’s Case’ in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on William Shakespeare’s Othello*, ed. Andrew Hadfield, (London: Routledge, 2003), p.84

<sup>7</sup> Jardine, p.84, n.3

<sup>8</sup> Jardine, p.84. See Jardine’s essay for detailed examples of women being charged with adultery through the ecclesiastical court records of Durham, pp.8–7

<sup>9</sup> Jardine, p.84

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.75

<sup>12</sup> Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) pp.131–55 (p.138)

<sup>13</sup> R. Cleaver, *A Godly Forme of Household Government for the Ordering of the Private Families, According to the Direction of God’s Word* (London: Printed by Thomas Creede for Thomas Man, 1603) <http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/367/cleverdod.htm> [Accessed 30 July 2014]

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*