Declaration of Dependence: Desdemona’s Downfall

By Elona Dahi, Mt. San Antonio College
Mentor: Edgar Muñiz

Much of Shakespeare’s genius is attributed to his ability to remain timeless in a world where change is constant, and this might be due to his consistent ability to connect with the emotions, instincts, and impulses that lay at the core of each human being. Shakespeare’s enduring ability to connect with the human being and all of her or his baseness and complexities is captured in his tragic play Othello, which explores not only race, but also brings gender roles into question. Through the young heroine Desdemona, Shakespeare depicts a woman who makes an impulsive decision to wed herself to a social statement rather than a man, and suffers the consequences thereafter. Desdemona’s impulsiveness is often mistaken for independence; she behaves as she pleases and manipulates gender roles to work in her favor; her impetuous actions are a result of a lifelong habituation to privilege as a white noblewoman, and these decisions and her dependence on Othello lead to her demise; in stark contrast, Emilia, her female counterpart, is significantly less privileged and impulsive, yet she exhibits more independence than Desdemona, which ultimately contributes to the final and only act of female solidarity in the end of the play.

Desdemona employs gender roles in order to maneuver a series of events to go her way; in manipulating her current situation to her preferred standards, she further attaches herself to her husband, and does not consider the consequences of sequestering her right to be considered an individual. Desdemona utilizes the biblical definition of man and wife as one flesh in order to mold a situation in which she would be allowed to go to war alongside her husband. Desdemona insists “if i be left behind, a moth of peace, and he go to the war, the rites for why I love him are bereft me (...) let me go with him” (1.3.291-294). As Smith and Seigel argue, “[Desdemona] simply alters her culture’s notion of the ideal submissive woman” (Smith and Seigel). In twisting the cultural norms to meet her desires, Desdemona wins the approval of the men in court as well as her husband; while she does get what she wants, she simultaneously puts forth the idea that she needs their approval to do what she wants, further empowering the patriarchal dynamics in her relationship with Othello, and thereby weakening her stance as an individual. Desdemona plays on the idea that a wife’s purpose is to serve her husband when her father discovers her marriage to Othello. Desdemona defends her role as a wife in saying “...you
are the lord of duty. I am hitherto your daughter but here is my husband. And so much duty as
my mother showed to you, preferring you to her father, so much I challenge that I may profess
due to the Moor my lord” (1.3.212-218). Desdemona wields the patriarchal system to her
convenience, and while this may initially seem as though she is taking control of the situation,
this facade of independence is exposed when deconstructing the logic-or lack thereof- behind
Desdemona’s actions. In the context and setting of the play, marriage cannot be undone. Rather
than acting independently of her father and society’s opinion and facing the issue of race prior to
her marriage, Desdemona flees and elopes so that nothing can be done to break her bond with
Othello after their marriage is exposed. Desdemona insists her duty is to her husband, and she
establishes herself as his property, making their marriage revolve around servitude rather than
partnership. In their analysis of Desdemona and her relationship with her father, Gordana
Kakkonen and Ana Penjack suggest, “Shakespearean womanhood is problematic, since women
have been defining themselves in relation to men” (Kakkonen and Penjack). This point is
reaffirmed since Desdemona explains that her duty is either to her father or her husband; she
defines her life and its purpose solely upon the men around her. Desdemona’s twisting of
gender roles is an impulsive choice she makes in the moment; her reliance on gender roles to
escape being held responsible for her actions leads to a dependence on men for an identity,
which is problematic when her father is no longer alive to protect her from Othello’s rageful
jealousy.

Desdemona feels free to behave as she desires, but her behavior does not reflect an
independent spirit; rather, it unveils a life of privilege that Desdemona has become habituated
to, allowing her to do and say as she pleases without having to think of any consequences,
further enabling her impulsive nature masqueraded as independence. However, it is important
to note that Desdemona’s entitlement is only further enabled by the men who have contributed
to her life of privilege as she continuously ignores the social constructs she has been taught,
being the daughter of a senator. Brabantio’s political leverage is made evident when he exhibits
the authority to have Othello, who is also politically powerful in his own right, brought before the
duke upon discovery that he has married Desdemona. Brabantino, as a politician, has at least
enough clout to bring Othello to judgment. Brabantino is also white and therefore has inherent
privilege over Othello due to the racist society within the context of the play, and his white
privilege is reflected in Desdemona’s entitled attitude towards Othello himself as she demands
favors of him. Most women would be unable to accompany their husbands to war; however,
Othello’s status allows Desdemona the privilege of insisting to do so. Othello states that while
he is a man and views his wife sexually, his priority will always be his career. He assures
Desdemona's accompaniment is not “to comply with heat and proper satisfaction, but to be free and bounteous with her mind” (1.3.297-300). Othello further grants Desdemona the privilege to behave impulsively as he encourages her to be “free and bounteous”. Because Desdemona follows suit with this behavior, Othello's insecurities develop into suspicions that begin to appear validated to him. Emily C. Bartels highlights this trait in Desdemona's personality as she notes, “[Desdemona’s] blatant expression of her desires (...) as she mediates for Cassio (...) Shakespeare makes clear from the outset that, while the agenda is Cassio’s, at issue is her will and right to voice it” (Bartels). Bartels’ depiction of Desdemona reveals that Desdemona feels not only the need, but the right to involve herself in an issue that does not necessitate any action on her part. Desdemona advocates for Cassio’s return to his position multiple times in the same conversation with Othello.

DESDEMONA. But shall't be shortly?
OTHELLO. The sooner, sweet, for you.
DESDEMONA. Shall't be to-night at supper?
OTHELLO. No, not tonight.
DESDEMONA. Tomorrow dinner, then?
OTHELLO. I shall not dine at home; I meet the captains at the citadel.
DESDEMONA. 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 (3.3.61-71).

Desdemona demands that Othello return Cassio his job as Othello repeatedly attempts to thwart the topic. It is Desdemona’s entitled personality that makes her so persistent in pleading Cassio’s case, which in turn sparks Othello’s transition to jealousy. Margret Ranald comments on the multiple traits that make Desdemona feel the right to involve herself in issues that are not of her concern: “Shakespeare shows this situation as really arising from the impulsive and sympathetic nature of Desdemona. She is by no means a frightened little girl, but a warm, vital, strong-willed though rather inexperienced woman” (Ranald). While it may be in Desdemona’s nature to be sympathetic, warm, and strong-willed, her impulsiveness is only facilitated further by her privileged lifestyle. Desdemona was born into status and received an education, and therefore feels the ability to use her own judgement to do as she pleases, but she does not consider the consequences; this attitude can be seen throughout the play including the initial conflicts that set the whole play into motion: her choice to elope with Othello, her argument with Iago, and, most crucially, her readiness to assert herself into the militaristic world of men on Cassio’s behalf after he has fallen from Othello’s good graces.

Desdemona’s lack of independence is most notably apparent, not in her actions, but by examining her thought process, specifically her failure to acknowledge the double standard
existing between wives and husbands, exemplified in Emilia’s speech on infidelity. Emilia stays relatively silent during Iago’s misogynist rant in Act II because he is her husband and she recognizes he has a certain level of power over her. This recognition is manifested in her analysis of marriage: “Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor for caps, nor for any petty exhibition …” (4.3.81-84). Emilia acknowledges her marriage has worth in saying she would not sacrifice it for certain material objects, but rather for power. In viewing it from an economic perspective, Emilia now sees marriage from both the male and female perspective. She weighs its worth in comparing it to material objects and therefore places herself in the mindset of a man; Emilia has now gained two points of view and has removed herself further from the conflicts taking place; rather than being in the thick of the conflicts, she is on the outside looking in, and therefore has a greater understanding than Desdemona, who is arguably blinded by her love for Othello.

Emilia plays the dutiful wife just as Desdemona does; however, she differs in her stance of being treated as an individual rather than an attachment to her husband. Emilia exemplifies her determination to be treated as an individual in one of the most controversial ways a woman could when she brings Iago Desdemona’s handkerchief.

EMILIA. And give’t Iago. What he will do with it Heaven knows, not I. I nothing but to please his fantasy.
Enter IAGO.
IAGO. How now? what do you here alone?
EMILIA. Do not you chide. I have a thing for you.
IAGO. A thing for me? it is a common thing—
EMILIA. Ha?
IAGO. To have a foolish wife.
EMILIA. O, is that all? What will you give me now For the same handkerchief?
IAGO. What handkerchief?
EMILIA. What handkerchief?
Why, that the Moor first gave to Desdemona, That which so often you did bid me steal (3.3.344-350).

Shakespeare uses the comedic undertone of this exchange between Emilia and Iago as a medium to reveal the multifaceted nature of their relationship and more importantly to allow a female character to express her sexuality. On one level, Emilia knows her place as a wife in society is to serve her husband, so she fulfils his request and steals Desdemona’s handkerchief; however, on a deeper level, Emilia also understands her own physical needs as a woman. Emilia does the necessary to attain her goal and adopts a demanding tone as she takes control of the conversation. Just as Iago knows what he wants, Emilia also knows what she wants; the couple shares a common philosophy through which Emilia states, “having the world for your
labor, 'tis wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right”. (4.3.90-94) Emilia steals the handkerchief to 'make right' what she desires. Iago desires the handkerchief because he wishes to 'make right' his plot to destroy Othello. While their goals may differ, their shared common philosophy allows Emilia to establish herself as Iago's partner because she understands her marriage, unlike the union of Desdemona and Othello, is not one based on love, her independent spirit emerges as a result. On the other hand, Desdemona makes herself Othello's servant by failing to separate her wants and needs from those of her husband.

Emilia's independent thinking is ultimately epitomized in her diatribe when she chooses to expose the double standard of infidelity and marriage while Desdemona ignores it. Emilia firsts states that if a woman is untrue in her marriage, it is the fault of her husband, and continues on to suggest that wives possess ownership over their husbands' bodies. She argues:

But I do think it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps;
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us (4.3.97-101).

A woman claiming ownership over her husband's body is a bizarre and audacious statement to make which highlights the absurdity of the idea that one person could own another simply due to the fact that they are bound together by a social construct. It offers an antithesis to the heavily emphasized notion that Desdemona was Brabantino's stolen property in the exposition of the play. Emilia continues on in her rant to assert that just as men feel and have senses, women do also. She asserts:

EMILIA: Or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite.
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know Their wives have sense like them. They see and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do When they change us for others? Is it sport? I think it is. And doth affection breed it? I think it doth. Is 't frailty that thus errs? it is so too. And have not we affections, desires for sport, and frailty, as men have? (4.3.101-113)

Emilia attributes men's infidelity to weakness and by doing so decentralizes their authority in the marital relationship; moreover, Emilia takes authority away from men in insisting that women have the same human tendencies that men have and sarcastically proposes that one way for women to take revenge is to indulge those very human instincts and urges, just as men do. She
rant: “Then let them use us well. Else let them know, The ills we do, their ills instruct us so” (4.3.97-115). She ends her argument with the biting irony that since it is indeed a patriarchal society, women will learn to cheat and abuse in relationships from the very husbands who teach them to do so by acting out themselves.

In the end, both women die, but Emilia dies liberated. As Solomon Lyasere observes, “Emilia's decision to 'speak out' is a unique existential event (...) repeatedly in Shakespeare the test of life itself is not whether a character can be seen but whether he or she can be heard ... if the sign of life is speech, the sign of death is silence” (Lyasere). Emilia takes a defiant stance on the gender double standard and defends Desdemona’s honor in an act of solidarity. Both of these acts were not welcomed by a patriarchal society, Emilia knows this and acknowledges it as she insists, “Let me have leave to speak. ‘Tis proper to obey him, but not now. Perchance Iago, I will ne'er go home(...) I will speak as liberal as the north” (5.2.233-261). Emilia compares herself to the freely blowing north wind, a force of nature that cannot be tamed by man; subsequently, Iago no longer owns her. In disobeying her husband and exposing his plot against Othello, as well as voicing the truth to restore honor and justice to Desdemona’s name, Emilia finally liberates herself in the last moments of her life.

While Desdemona, a young and passionate woman in love, follows the desires of her heart and may initially seem independent for her choices, a closer examination of her actions reveal her to be rather impulsive, which ultimately leads to her demise. Conversely, Emilia, a more mature and experienced but less privileged woman, understood the plight of women in the hypocritical patriarchal society of her time. Emilia spoke freely in defense of Desdemona, committing to the act of solidarity, challenging the oppressive patriarchal values of her time, and liberating herself in death. Both women exhibited honor, telling the truth in the face of death. At a time where women were treated as property, William Shakespeare gave the world two brave female characters and contributed to the development of the modern feminist ideal that behind one strong woman, there is another strong woman ready to defend her when the need presents itself.
Works Cited


